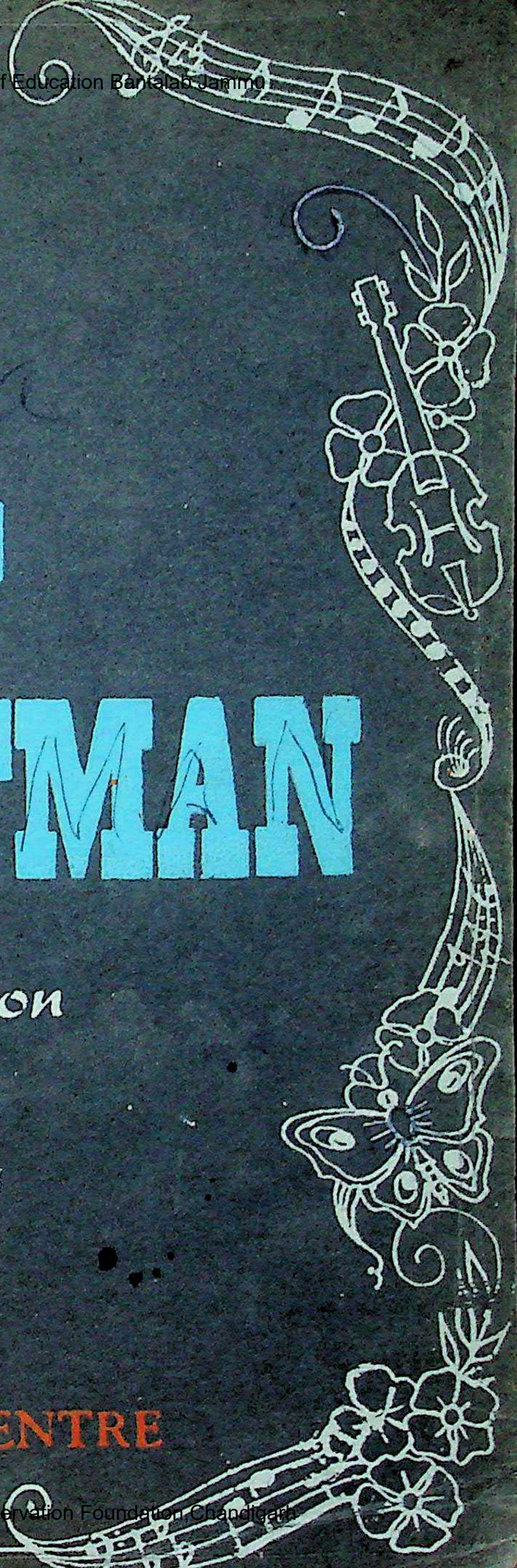
RAMJI LALL

WALT WHITMAN

An Evaluation of His Poetry



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WALT WHITMAN

AN EVALUATION OF HIS POETRY

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WALT WHITMAN

AN EVALUATION OF HIS POETRY

(With a Detailed Consideration of Important Poems with their Text)

By

RAMJI LALL

Formerly Principal
Dyal Singh College
University of Delhi
Delhi

TENTH EDITION
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PREFACE TO THE TENTH EDITION

It is indeed a matter for gratification that the Ninth Edition of this book was so well received by the student community necessitating the bringing out of the Tenth Edition. Once again the demand for the Tenth Edition of this book within a remarkably short period is a sufficient proof that it has proved more useful to the students than many other books on the subject already available in the market.

The coming out of the Tenth Edition of this book on Walt Whitman's *Selected Poems* is a matter of great pride for the publishers who are highly thankful to the student community for their warm reception accorded to the earlier editions of this book. It is hoped that the Tenth Edition in its present form and get-up will prove still more useful to the student community.

New Delhi
February 1988 **Publishers**

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

This book is intended as an aid to the understanding of Walt Whitman, a great American poet, whose claim to distinction lies in : (*i*) his being the bard of American democracy, (*ii*) his being the first American celebrant of sex and the human senses, (*iii*) his being a radiant optimist, and (*iv*) his doing away with metre and rhyme and yet producing the rhythms of poetry. Besides his exaltation of democracy and sex, the dominant themes in his *Leaves of Grass*, paradoxical as it may seem, are "death", and his mystical beliefs in the all pervasive existence of God or the Divine Spirit and in the immortality of the human soul. An attempt has been made to deal with these and other aspects of Whitman's poetry at some length. Whitman is not an easy poet. While one can easily follow the train of his thought in passages where he simply expounds or dwells upon his democratic faith and in passages where he glorifies the human body and the human senses, he baffles readers, even advanced students of literature, in poems which contain symbolical significances and which seek to convey mystical intuitions and beliefs. The advanced university student may therefore find this book useful in so far as it aims at an elucidation of Whitman's work.

It may be added that no originality is claimed for this book. The intention was to select, coordinate and simplify available critical material and to present it to the student in an intelligible and assimilable form.

New Delhi
January 1971

RAMJI LALL

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1

Walt Whitman : A Brief Biographical Sketch

Walt (Walter) Whitman was born on May 31, 1819 at West Hills, Long Island, N.Y. His father was a Quaker carpenter, of English descent. His mother was descended from Dutch farmers, with a strain of Welsh. The Whitman family had moved from Connecticut to Long Island in the seventeenth century, and at one time owned a large tract of land. In 1823, the family moved to Brooklyn where Walt attended public elementary schools.

The second of nine children in the family, Walt began working at the age of twelve and learnt the printing trade. He was employed as a printer in Brooklyn and New York city, taught in country schools on Long Island (the "Paumanok" of his poems), and became a journalist. At the age of twenty-three, he edited a daily newspaper in New York. From 1846 to 1848, he worked as editor of *The Brooklyn Eagle*, the leading newspaper in the city at that time, from which he was discharged because of the strength of his convictions for abolishing slavery and for free soil. He next went to New Orleans where he worked for three months on a newspaper called *The Crescent* and he got a chance to see much of the country he later described so richly in his poems. According to some biographers, he had at this time a love-affair with a Creole woman, but there is no evidence for it. Back in New York, he worked with his father in building houses and dabbling in real estate business, and also worked as a free-lance journalist from 1850 till 1855. During these years he read extensively and began experimenting with a new style of poetry. While school-teacher, printer, and journalist, he had published sentimental stories and poems in newspapers and popular magazines, but they showed almost no literary promise.

By the spring of 1855, he had written enough poems in his new style for a thin volume which he called *Leaves of Grass*, and which proved a landmark in the history of American literature. Published at his own expense, this first edition of the book was little appreciated in literary circles though it was warmly praised by Emerson who in a personal letter to Whitman wrote : "I greet you at the beginning of a great career." The second edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared in the following year but this also proved a financial failure. From 1857 to 1859, Whitman edited *The Brooklyn Times* which he had to leave because of church opposition to his frankly expressed ideas on the sexual problems of the unmarried, abortion, prostitution, and slavery.

He continued to earn his living mainly from undistinguished hack-work, and whatever craftsmanship he learned had little relation to his poetry. But the opportunity to observe the growing metropolis—with its theatres, many occupations and diverse national cultures—had a profound effect. Later in life, he said that his great work, *Leaves of Grass*, was the result of his "life in Brooklyn and New York from 1838 to 1853, absorbing a million people, for fifteen years, with an intimacy, an eagerness, an abandon, probably never equalled."

In 1860, a Boston publisher brought out the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*, greatly enlarged and re-arranged but the outbreak of the Civil War resulted in the firm's becoming bankrupt. In 1862 Whitman went down to a battlefield in Virginia to look for his wounded brother, George, and stayed on in Washington, D. C., to work as a volunteer nurse in army hospitals, supporting himself by doing secretarial work and writing articles. After the war he secured the post of a clerk in the United State Department of the Interior, but was dismissed when his boss discovered his authorship of *Leaves of Grass* which he thought to be indecent and obscene. Many friends at this stage came forward to defend him and got him a job in the office of the Attorney General. One of these friends, William Douglas O'Connor, wrote a pamphlet, *The Good Gray Poet* (1866), a title that became a common public image of Whitman and helped to clear much of the misunderstanding about him. Whitman collected and published his most significant prose in *Democratic Vistas* (1871).

In 1873, Whitman got an attack of paralysis which compelled him to give up his job in the Attorney General's Office. He left Washington to live with his brother George, in Camden, N. J. His mother died a few months later and this was the darkest year of his life.

Meanwhile, he had continued to print new editions of his poems, a collection of war poems called *Drum-Taps* in 1865, and revised editions of *Leaves of Grass*. The Attorney General of Massachusetts threatened the publishers of the seventh edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1881) with criminal prosecution because several poems were regarded as obscene, but Whitman refused to make a single change in the work. Because of better sales of the book, Whitman was able now to buy a modest little cottage in Camden on Mickle Street, where he lived until his death on March 26, 1892, from several diseases, of the lungs, stomach, liver, and kidneys.

The details of Whitman's life before 1873 have remained obscure, so that biographers have indulged in much guess-work. But a frequent companion of Whitman, Horace Traubel, kept an adequate record of the period after 1873. The "good gray poet" was fond of company, and a small intellectual circle formed around him. This included John Burroughs, the naturalist; Peter Doyle, a horse-car conductor; and Mrs. Anne Gilchrist, an English author. Like Whitman himself, this circle was libertarian and non-conformist in sentiment.

Walt Whitman came of a family which was not a healthy one. His youngest brother was feeble-minded; one brother died in a mental institution ; another died of tuberculosis of the throat ; and a sister was neurasthenic. But he himself had a robust constitution and possessed a lot of natural stamina. In the early editions of *Leaves of Grass* he gave symbolical values to health, physical stamina and vigorous ancestry in such poems as *Song of Myself* and *I Sing the Body Electric*. He was remarkably loyal to his family and gave money generously to any member who needed it, but especially to his mother, to whom he was strongly attached, and to his feeble-minded brother. In the matter of personal companionships, he preferred uneducated working men, and was so affectionate towards several that he has been accused of homosexuality. He made no secret of his love for these men, and celebrated it in the "Calamus" section of *Leaves of Grass* and some war poems in "Drum-Taps". Unconventional in sexual conduct though he was, there is no evidence that he actually had the six illegitimate children of whom he boasted and whom he never identified. He did advocate greater sexual freedom and tolerance ("Spontaneous Me", "A Woman Waits For Me"), but sex in his poems is also symbolical—of (*a*) Rousseauistic innocence, (*b*) "the procreant urge of the world", and (*c*) the regenerative power of nature. In some of his poems his own erotic emotions may have confused him, but in his greatest, such as parts of *Song of Myself* and all of *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, sex is spiritualised. His greatest themes are death and re-birth (*When Licas Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd*), and his poems are filled with the "unflagging pregnancy" of nature : sprouting grass, mating birds, phallic vegetation, the maternal ocean and planets in formation ("the journey-work of stars").

At the time of his death, Whitman was more honoured in Europe than in his own country. This European reputation began in 1868, when William Rossetti edited a British edition of the selected poems of Whitman. Mrs. Anne Gilchrist, a British author, became so enamoured of the personality in the poems that she fell in love with Whitman, wrote critical appreciations of his work, pushed up the sale of his books, and eventually went to America with the intention of marrying him. During the remainder of his life, Whitman received much encouragement, financial and psychological, from leading writers in England, France, Denmark and Norway, where he was greeted as the poet of democracy by the liberal sections of the reading public. Swinburne addressed an ode to the American poet of freedom but later criticised his poetry for its excessive didacticism. He was quite literally worshipped in Germany in the late nineteenth century and after World War I because of the Oriental mysticism in his poetry. But he is still better known as the poet of democracy than simply as a poet. He is more of a musicians' poet than a poets' poet. Many of his poems were set to music and several symphonic compositions were based on his work, perhaps the most famous being Paul Hindemith's *When Lilacs Last in the Door Yard Bloom'd*. Twentieth century scholars and critics find Whitman's social thought less important than his artistry. T. S. Eliot has said ; "When Whitman speaks of the lilacs or the mocking-bird his theories and beliefs drop away like a needless pretext."

2

Walt Whitman :
The Man and the Poet

Walt Whitman left school at the age of eleven or twelve. His family had no interest in literature and no understanding of his purpose. Among his eight brothers and sisters, one brother remained a child all his life ; one, who was syphilitic, went insane ; one died a consumptive ; one married a wife of dubious morality and was himself no model citizen ; and one sister proved to be highly neurotic. Had Whitman died at the age of 36, he would not now be remembered. He spent most of his life away from home, he drifted from job to job and enjoyed long periods of idleness, he was intermittently a local politician and a newspaper editor. Yet in 1855, because of some mysterious psychological alchemy, this lazy Long Islander underwent a fundamental transformation. He then printed the first version of one of the seminal books in American literature, *Leaves of Grass*, a title that often refers to all of his poetical production, a work he constantly revised and added to. He invented a new form of poetry and created a style uniquely his own.

Whitman somehow acquired a working knowledge of many branches of science and of pseudo-science, of operatic and choral music, of contemporary European thought and literature, a wide grasp of geography, an easy fund of historical information, and a sense of mission as an American writer unparalleled in earlier literature.

He was capable of posing and pretentiousness. He was not a systematic thinker. He used words loosely and inconsistently. He passed through various phases of affirmation and depression, each of which left some trace upon his masterpiece. We shall probably never know the secret of his inner life. Though he was the first great celebrant of sex in American literature, we can discover nothing about his sexual experiences, but only that he never married, that he once claimed to have begotten illegitimate children, and that his passionate attachment to youngmen exposed him to a charge of homosexuality. But he was also kindly, modest, generous, self-sacrificing, simple, and essentially good—altogether one of the most complex personalities in the nineteenth century.

Only writers like Emerson and Thoreau had a good word for Whitman. The American public in general either ignored the author of *Leaves of Grass* or held him in contempt. His extreme unconventionality and Bohemianism—in words, appearance, and attitudes—shocked a nation that was determinedly middle-class and Victorian.

A complex man and artist, Whitman exhibits many seeming contradictions. He voiced a personal religion at the same time as he hailed science and materialism. While denying death, he heard on Paumanok "the sweet and delicious word death", and wrote what has often been regarded as the great elegy of American literature, *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd.* He celebrated peace but at the same time regarded his book as an instrument of humanity's struggles. Like the transcendentalists, and in particular Emerson, (who he said brought him "to a boil" as a creative artist), he disowned a foolish consistency.

There were three stages of his life at which Whitman wrote great poems. The earliest stages lasted from 1855 to 1856. It was the time when he wrote the twelve poems of the first edition of his *Leaves of Grass* and the twenty new poems that were added in the following year to the second edition. The *Song of Myself* which fills nearly half of the first edition, contains in it almost everything else he would ever write. It is one of the great visionary poems of the modern times. Some of the 1856 poems are masterpieces, notably *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* and the *Song of the Open Road.*

The second period coincided with Whitman's emotional crisis of the years 1859-60. That was the time when Whitman wrote the "Calamus" poems, some of which are mere statements of belief, to be read as if they were prose. Not all of them are prose however; for others are tender and, in their twisted way, his only real love-poems. The same years produced his two great desparing chants, *As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life* and *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.* At this point Whitman had found his two deepest longings, which were death and the womb of the mother-ocean.

The third period when he wrote great poems, but very few of them, extended from 1865 to 1873. By then his style had become mannered and verbose and vague—Whitmanian in the worst sense. This period produced his dirge for Abraham Lincoln and *Passage to India.*

Under the influence of the Romantic Age in literature and art, Whitman had the theory that the chief function of the poet was to create and express personality. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* also appeared during the most nationalistic period in American literature. "We want", shouted a character in Longfellow's *Kavanagh* (1849), "a national literature altogether shaggy and unshorn, that shall shake the earth, like a herd of buffaloes thundering over the prairies." With the same fervour, Whitman declared in his 1855 preface, "Here are the ruffs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves."

It was partly in response to this nationalistic ideal, and partly in accord with his own personal ambition to cultivate and express his own personality as an example, that the "I" of his poems asserted a mythical strength and vitality and assumed an appearance as shaggy and unshorn as Longfellow's buffalo. In his leading poem

Song of Myself, he characterised himself as, "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos, Disorderly,[1] fleshy and sensual ...eating, drinking and breeding,/...Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from..." From this time on throughout his life he attempted to dress the part and act the role of the shaggy, untamed poetic spokesman of the proud young nation.

For the expression of this symbolical ego, he also created a prosodic form without rhyme or metre, but abounding in oratorical rhythms and enchanted lists of names and objects. He learned to handle this primitive, enumerative style with great subtlety and was especially successful in creating empathy of space and movement. though to most of his contemporaries it seemed completely "unpoetic." Both the content and the manner of his verse also caused Whitman's first biographers, John Burroughs, R. M. Bucke, and even the poet himself, to confuse the symbolical self of the poems with the physical creator. The poetic "I" of *Leaves of Grass* annihilates time and space, binding past and present and intuiting the future, illustrating Whitman's belief that poetry is a form of knowledge, the supreme wisdom of mankind.

Whitman's audience was restricted from the beginning and is not likely to be ever a very large one. Nor have his critics and interpreters served him well. Some of them have spoken rapturously about him, while others have been contemptuous. And the rapture has been the worst of all because, as in the case of Oscar Wilde, it flowed mainly from a morbid interest. The facts about his life have been discovered but not frankly revealed. A well-balanced criticism of his work has not yet emerged.

Leaves of Grass must be read in fragments and it exists in literature only in fragments. A continuous reading of the book is regarded by some as one of the most depressing literary experiences. The endless and repetitious pageant passes by, and though the motive and reason of it is one of the finest and most humane in all literature, a weariness takes possession of the reader and it, after a while, gives rise to rebellion and disgust. Parts of the work are certainly great, but the whole is unendurable. In almost the same breath he writes :

> All truths wait in all things

and :

> Logic and sermons never convince.
> The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul.

and :

> I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there,

which is one of the great lines of all poetry, and

> Agonies are one of my changes of garments,
> I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself
> become the wounded person,
> My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and
> observe.

---

[1] or, Turbulent.

These four quotations are of the Messianic character and also of the creative spirit in literature. Equally deep and inspiring are the highest expressions of his individualism and of his desire that all men should share that heroic self-hood :

> None but are accepted, none but shall be dear to me.

But the self that men are asked to assume is indeed heroic, for :

> My call is the call of battle, I nourish active rebellion,
> He going with me must go well-arm'd,
> He going with me goes often with spare diet, poverty,
>   angry enemies, desertions.

And this tonic note occurs again and again and finds another perfect expression many years later in *Autumn Rivulets* :

> For I am the sworn poet of every dauntless rebel the
>   world over,
> And he going with me leaves peace and routine behind
>   him
> And stakes his life to be lost at any moment.

In apparent contradiction to this theme is Whitman's theme of universal acceptance which is almost Russian in its chaotic levelling impulse. But this type of communistic passion is due to an abnormal channelling of erotic impulses. There is something coldly orgiastic about his long list of those who shall be equal to him and to any and to the best. But before long he returns to his tonic note of individualism, of a democracy composed of freely consenting and varied personalities :

> Produce great Persons, the rest follows......
> Piety and conformity to them that like,
> Peace, obesity, allegiance to them that like,
> I am he who tauntingly compels men, women, nations,
> Crying : Leap from your seats and contend for your lives !

And once more :

> I swear nothing is good to me now that ignores
>   individuals,
> The American compact is altogether with individuals,
> The only government is that which makes minute of
>   individuals,
> The whole theory of the universe is directed unerringly
>   to one single individual—namely to You.

This is written in a generous and tonic strain, and the call to individualism here is noble. At the same time, it may be pointed out that this call to individualism has proved futile in the years that have passed since Whitman wrote these and other such lines. Whitman's call to unshackled freedom has been accepted by groups of each younger generation who have liberated themselves "from piety and conformity" merely for the sake of liberation, but have never found other objects to which to attach their love and loyalty. For, Whitman and many others have failed to make the distinction between freedom *from* and freedom *for*. To liberate oneself from a painful yoke is of great importance, if the light of a new ideal is already visible. Otherwise the end is apt to be mere chaos. All thinking is choosing among thoughts, all action is a selecting of a certain action among all possible ones. Life when sane in the higher sense is always guided. But Whitman proposes no new principles of guidance. And that is still another reason why he has failed as a poet by the very test which he himself proposed : "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it."[1]

He had, as a matter of fact, deeper and serener moments of purely creative insight. In such moments he wrote :

> And I will show that whatever happens to any body it
> may be turned to beautiful results,

and :

> Do not call the tortoise unworthy because she is not
> something else,

and :

> Whoever degrades another degrades me,

and :

> There is something to me profoundly affecting in large
> masses of men following the lead of those who do not
> believe in men.

Other examples of this kind of writing are *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* and *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd.*

But Whitman was not only essentially unlettered but strangely insensitive and uncritical. He can write :

> Eclaircisse the myths Asiatic, the primitive fable,

o :

> Yet O my soul supreme !
> Knowst thou the joy of pensive thoughts ? etc. etc.

which is close to mere drivel. America has had to pay a heavy price for her most highly endowed poet being an unlettered man as well as a man of hopelessly eccentric personality. Nor has this common man's voice been able to reach the common people whom he loved. Nor do his utterances about freedom evoke the same response which in the early years of this century they evoked. Yet unforgettable when all deductions have been made must not be only the chanter of those great hymnic passages, but the man who never despaired of liberty, who believed with all his morbid heart that "whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral drest in his shroud", and who was dedicated to "the good old cause, the great idea, the progress and freedom of the race."

Whitman was thirtysix when *Leaves of Grass* was first published and he spent the rest of his life re-writing it building it up into a great poetic autobiography so that, as he wrote later : "This is no book ; who touches this, touches a man."

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[1] 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman was a rebel, a person opposed to the established way of doing things and tried to do them in a new way, and not only new, but more interesting, more lively, and more fruitful. His primary contribution as an innovator was to offer new solutions to the problems posed by the relation between "tradition and the individual talent."

Two English sonnets may here be cited. One is Milton's sonnet on his blindness. Milton believed that he was destined to be a great English poet. He was stricken by blindness before he wrote his greatest work, and rebelled :

> When I consider how my light is spent,
> Ere half my days……

He murmured and complained ; but then he set his complaint against the Christian tradition which he believed in. God knew what He was doing, and the poem ends in resignation and patience and hope : "They also serve who only stand and wait." Milton makes a similar point in his great lament for his dead friend in *Lycidas* when he says in effect : What is the use of going on if you are liable to cut off by sudden death ; what is the use of preparing yourself to a great writer ? The answer is : Never mind, God knows what He is doing ; we will carry on as long as we are alive : "Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new." In his counterpointing of personal experience and tradition, Milton closed the gap between the two. It is across that gap that the poetic vision sparks.

When Keats reflects, as Milton had reflected, that he would die before writing his best poetry, he does not end by coming to terms with religion. He does not say, "God knows what He is doing." He turns instead to sheer elegiac introspection. When he is afraid that he may die before he has written what it is in him to write :

> …………then on the shore,
> Of the wide world I stand alone, and think,
> Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.

That tendency to elegiac introspection develops in a literature when the pole of traditional affirmation is missing and the poet is forced back solely on his personal experience.

In the Victorian elegiac mode in Tennyson and Arnold and so many others, the poet broods in a scene which is set in order to deflect all attention back to the self. In Whitman's *Song of Myself* we see a radically different orientation of the poet in respect to himself, to the physical setting, and to the traditional artfulness which he employs :

> One's self I sing, a simple separate person,
> Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

"One's self I sing" not "myself I sing." We cannot imagine Arnold or Tennyson using the word "one" to refer to themselves either in *Dover Beach* or in *In Memoriam* or anywhere else. This is how Whitman opens his poem :

> I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
> And what I assume you shall assume,
> For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

The colloquialness, the ease of speech, is one thing. This poet's relation to traditional artfulness is obviously different from Tennyson's or Arnold's, but his attitude to himself is also somewhat different.

In spite of the driving egotism, the self is somehow transmuted from the beginning, as it is in the first word of the opening inscription, "One's-self I sing". Whitman is concerned to build up in his own special way a picture of the relationship to his self, first to other selves, secondly to the external world of nature and thirdly to other moments in time than the moment which he is experiencing now. The relationship of the poet to external nature is not one simply of a poet who gets from nature certain scenic assistance, as though nature is the great backdrop for human emotion. Whitman is different :

> Trippers and askers surround me,
> People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the
> ward and city I live in or the nation, etc. etc.
> (*Section 4, Song of Myself*)

This is a most complex situation. The poet is observing other people : he is surrounded by other people. He is concerned with daily things of life—"My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues." At the same time that he is aware of them, he is aware of his relationship with them. He is cultivating deliberately a pose of awareness in the light of which his response to what he sees can be more than merely elegiac, or merely traditional, merely the report of something, merely the register or individual emotion about something. And then there is that remarkable poem *The Sleepers* where, under the shadow of night, the poet imagines all the people who are sleeping under the different roofs of this community ; and one by one he identifies himself with them in that special poetic mode which was really his invention.

The enormous catalogues, in *Leaves of Grass*, of America at work have for their function the bringing together of the perceiver and the perceived so that a new view of history, of time, of identity, of consciousness, of reality and, of the cosmos, is made possible.

Whitman was the great "time-binder and space-binder." All the new techniques which he introduces into his poetry are devices for somehow solving the problem we all feel of life developing, slipping away into isolated fragments of time, isolated units of consciousness, which cannot make real contact with each other. He was a great rider of ferries and street-cars.[1] One of his finest poems is *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, where he sees the ferry as the space-binder going to and fro connecting places, and the people going to and fro, changing their geographical location. This poem discovers the perfect symbol of time, space, and diversity among people of geographical and chronological diversity. Whitman looks around and sees the sights and sounds of Brooklyn and of Manhattan. He sees the people, speculates on where they came from, what they are

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[1] A street-car is an expression used in America for a transport bus.

doing, their diverse occupations, interests, sufferings, thoughts, hopes, fears ; and one by one he enters into them.

The mosaic of ideas in T. S. Eliot, the stream of consciousness in the modern novel, and all those extraordinarily subtle devices through which the modern novelist and poet have tried to explore ways in which an individual sensibility can be modulated into an inclusive consciousness, are in the tradition of Whitman. How to escape the prison of the self and cultivate simultaneously self-consciousness and sympathy, using the sense of self-identity as a means of projecting oneself into the identity of others—that is Whitman's most valuable legacy to modern literature.

It is certain that Whitman was well-grounded in Emerson before he wrote *Leaves of Grass*. Not only is the thought often the same, but there are many verbal echoes of Emerson in Whitman's work. Whitman, like Emerson, declared all things good ; he elevated the individual and defied man. For instance, in the poem *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, Whitman refers to his own reflection and the reflections of the other passengers as "fine, centrifugal spokes of light diverging from my head, and from each of the other heads, in the sunlit water." These spokes of light are, of course, halos. In Christian art the halo is restricted to the Holy Virgin, to Christ, and to the saints. Whitman endows everybody indiscriminately with this halo. (This is an example of Whitman's deification of man).

Whitman went beyond Emerson in certain respects. Emerson could not escape the Puritan inheritance, the strictness of conscience, the voice of duty. Theoretically a free-thinker, there was a temperamental inner check on his free-thought ; he was rather ascetic. Whitman was anti-Puritan, anti-ascetic. He was wonderfully relaxed : "I loaf and invite my soul", he said. He celebrated the body as well as the soul. He was the first American writer to celebrate sex.

Walt Whitman was by birth and education "of the people" more truly than was any previous American author of any importance. He learnt in his own youth the conflict of country and city life which was to help shape the American literature of the future. The thousand miniature pictures with which his poetry is studded were impressed in his memory in these early years. The 1867 edition of the *Leaves of Grass* added the poems from *Drum-Taps* to mark a third stage in his poetic progress. When Whitman learnt that his beloved brother, George, was wounded and was in an army hospital, he went to look after him, and then after the others who were wounded in the war. With the coming of sorrow, love for his fellows became more and more an impersonal bond with humanity, a principal of life closely associated with death. In these new war poems, and in their sequel, *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd*, the insistent personality of the poet becomes the universal principle that had been earlier proclaimed :

> Comrades mine and I in the midst...
> Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,
> There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.

In the death of Lincoln, the poet had found the symbol for the suffering and death he had seen in so many forgotten soldiers, and in giving his love to the dead leader he gave it to mankind.

The crisis of his own middle age remained always more real for him as a poet than the great national crisis of the Civil War, and at the centre of that personal crisis is a crushing sense of loneliness, of being unloved. In the years between 1855 and 1860, he apparently came to realize more and more clearly that not only would he never get married, but that there would never be for him any stable, continuing relationship either with male or female. This terrible truth his heart had guessed (he tells us in *Out of the Cradle......*) even as a child ; for him there would be no love not intimately blended with death.

Only with the creatures of his fancy, with an imagined "you", could he enter into an orgasmic unity. This "you" is sometimes conceived as a lost lover, sometimes as God, sometimes as an indiscriminate Everyman, often as the reader, most often as a second self..."the real Me." As the hero of his poems is called "I", so the loved one is called "You". It is an odd subject for the Great American Poem : the celebration (half-heroic, half-ironic) of the mating between an "I" whose reality is constantly questioned and an even more elusive "You". The latter pronoun in Whitman's verse almost always is followed by the phrase "whoever you are". *Song of Myself* begins with the word "I" but ends with you : "I stop somewhere waiting for you". In much of Whitman's earlier poetry, we find the writer's passionate enjoyment of his own individuality, but we also find in it an equally passionate feeling of the merging of his own individuality with that of common humanity. "This two-fold feeling lies at the core of that strangely assorted rhapsody, the *Song of Myself*, and also of the winsome reverie, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*".

His hero in his poetry is himself. He is, in this sense, the first truly modern poet with epic ambitions, the first author to portray himself as the mythic representative of his people and his time. His Odysseus is Walt Whitman ; his descent into the underworld, the plunge into the darkness of his own mind. The irony of this, the absurdity of treating heroically such anti-heroic matter, does not escape him. "Do you suppose yourself advancing on real ground toward a real heroic man ?" He asks his reader. It is not out of simple vanity, nor without self-mockery, that Whitman attempts in *Leaves of Grass* his odd autobiographical epic, his mythicized Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-Aged Hero.

The transcendental truths which he dealt with were impressed by him with his own personality, so that we see a towering egotism n his work. He gave to the longest poem in his 1855 volume the title *Walt Whitman*, and the first line in this poem reads : "I celebrate myself......" However, his egotism is not narrow or selfish. In celebrating himself, he becomes a type of the whole human race :

> And what I assume you shall assume :
> For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to
> you......
> I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise......
> I embody all presences out-lawed or suffering......

Whitman's ego appears in his poems as a traveller and explorer, not as a static observer : its object is "to know the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for travelling souls." Whitman's perpetual journey" is not just a sight-seeing trip, though his catalogues might give that impression. What seems at first a penetration of nature by the mind, is actually a process in which the known world comes into being. The "child who went forth every day, and who now goes, and will always go forth every day", is indistinguishable from the world of his experiences : "The first object he looked upon, that object he became,/And that object became part of him." The true voyage is the endless becoming of reality :

> Allonce : to that which is endless as it was beginningless,
> To undergo much, tramp of days, rests of nights,
> To merge all in the travel they tend to, and the days and
> nights they tend to,
> Again to merge them in the start of superior journeys...
> (*Song of the Open Road*)

Here there is no clear distinction among the traveller, the road, and the journey, for the journey is nothing but the progressive unity of the voyager and the land he enters. God, in this context, is a "seething principle", and human society is a flow of "shapes ever projecting other shapes."

The "I" of Whitman's poems speaks the world that he sees, and sees the world that he speaks, and does this by *becoming* the reality of his vision and of his words, in which the reader also participates. Most of Whitman's poems, more or less explicitly, are "voyages" in this metaphysical sense. This was Whitman's genre, his "new theory of literary composition for imaginative works."

The patent symbols of Whitman's best poem, *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd*, are conditioned by the thorough-going symbolism of his poetic attitude. As in most elegies, the person mourned is hardly more than the occasion of the work. Lincoln is seldom mentioned either as a person or as a type. Instead, the focus of the poem is a presentation of the poet's mind at work in the context of Lincoln's death.

In Whitman's vocabulary, words like egotism and arrogance are not used in a derogatory sense. They are good words. "I dote on myself", he says, "There is that lot of me and all so luscious". "Nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is/Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself." This kind of egotism is almost foolish.

Holding that everything is worthy of celebration in song, Whitman has little sense of relative values. But he has at his best the poetic vision which illuminates the sordid and common-place, and his robust optimism does not blind him to the uglier aspect of modern society. In his prose work, *Democratic Vistas* (1871), influenced by Carlyle, he warns America against a soulless materialism.

Whitman's poetry, which is chaotic and rhapsodical, appeals by the breadth and serenity of its outlook, and an emotional tenderness which is usually manly and wholesome. The extreme lack of reticence in certain poems created a violent prejudice, and the poet of democracy has never been popular, though he has fervent admirers and his indirect influence was for long considerable.

The sea and the shore are more than settings in his poetry. They are the essential themes. We are not surprised when in *As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life*, he calls sea and shore his mother and his father. Everything essential to Whitman is the gift of ocean. Not only in the crucial central Section of *Leaves of Grass* called "Sea-Drift", but throughout the long poem, the sea intrudes in image and sound, the sea as Great Mother presiding over the dying and over those being born. Wherever death is named or suggested, the off-stage noise of the sea is heard. For it was the sea (we are told in *Out of the Cradle……*) that first lisped to the poet "the low and delicious word death." "If Whitman is the singer of the death of love, he is also the singer of the love of death. Indeed, it is as the laureate of death (not of democracy or self-love or healing or sex) that we finally remember him."

Whitman's work and the records of his life give rise to a slightly unpleasant impression. One has to overcome this impression before his great qualities can be separated and enjoyed. It is because of that unpleasant impression that the democratic masses whom he celebrated have passed him by. There is too much false modesty and posturing and embracing. One is not at all surprised after that at the anecdotes concerning street-car conductors nor at Peter, Doyle, nor yet at the disorder and sordidness and sordid quarrels of those last years in the Mickle Street house in Camden, which extended beyond his death. No wonder that the guardians of Horace Traubel's adolescence warned him against "the lecherous old man." There spoke the voice of the people. Whitman must have been a very dreadful person indeed. And this was a real misfortune to American literature, since this dreadful person happened to be a man of authentic genius.

In sexual conduct he was unconventional, but it seems that six illegitimate children of whom he boasted in his old age were the product of his imagination. He did advocate greater sexual freedom and tolerance (as in *Spontaneous Me* and *A Woman Waits For Me*) but sex in his poems is also symbolical—of "the procreant urge of the world", and the regenerative power of nature. In some of his poems the poet's own erotic emotions may have confused him, but in his greatest, such as parts of *Song of Myself*, and all of *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, sex is spiritualized. His two greatest themes are Death and rebirth as in *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd.*

Whitman was one of the significant voices of the nineteenth century, expressing in his symbolism its creative, its transitional, and its revolutionary character. He will come to be regarded as its most prophetic, if not its perfect, voice. He was the first powerful poet to celebrate the upsurge of the masses and the potentiality of the "divine average" in terms of an ideal democracy. He is modern in his impulses, particularly in his emphasis on the vital importance of sex in human relationships which is Freudian in its perceptions. In his poetry, a dominant theme is not so much democracy, as sex the life-force which, escaping from the suppression of a false morality, revitalises love, and makes an enduring democratic society possible, something no institutions or political or economic methods can guarantee. (In Whitman's important prose, however, the ruling theme is democracy, and how it can get leadership and be maintained and made to grow).

Many of his contemporaries, denied that Whitman wrote poetry at all. They usually meant poetry in what they regarded as the proper form, or written upon subjects which they felt to be poetical. Even so, the denial is difficult to understand. His verse is sensuous and passionate and at its best simple, thus according with Milton's definition. It does not fail, again at its best, when judged by the severer condition that its form should convey its sense. True, it is difficult to find a poem in *Leaves of Grass* which is one perfect chrysolite, yet still more difficult to deny the attributes of great poetry to *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd*, or many other poems even more characteristic of the singer of democracy.

Walt Whitman as a poet and artist suffered from his too urgent sense of the importance of his self-appointed mission. His intense belief in the worth of original inspiration made him leave many a line in its first crudity. Again, in spite of powerful lines where every word was right, his feeling for words was often inferior. In this, as in his dislike of "polishing", he was a true American. Furthermore, he lived in a period of literary romanticism which favoured extravagance and discouraged restraint. During his lifetime his success had been a mere notoriety of sexual sensationalism. But it was not long after his death that Whitman took his rightful place as the first poet of continental America and as the bard of democracy. His verse no longer offended the ear except of the most orthodox. Shakespeare's blank-verse is more difficult for a school-boy of the twentieth century than the irregular roll of Whitman's lines. Much of the humanitarianism and the political philosophy in *Leaves of Grass* came to be regarded as timely and relevant to great issues.

One may look at Whitman's poetry from three different angles : (1) His poetry is the climax of the romantic movement in the United States. (2) In part it is dateless and universal, as timeless and universal as our human sense of mystery and tragedy. (3) His poetry shows him as the precursor of modern American literature. American literature has developed, to a great extent, along lines which Whitman forecast and according to principles which he laid down. In him appear both poles of the American literary development—romance and realism. As if in answer to Whitman's call, American writings have made increasing use of native themes. The literary independence of America, which was ardently proclaimed by Emerson and Whitman, had already been established by the early twentieth century.

Whitman is a forerunner of twentieth century America not only in his national feeling, but in certain other respects also. In his revolt against convention, whether social or literary, modern authors have increasingly followed him. Under his influence, as also encouraged by Freudian psychology, some twentieth century authors insist upon the romantic desire to free the individual from the restraints of decorum. In respect of poetic style, the romantic desire for freedom has led to a tremendous variety of experiments, metrical and unmetrical, which would have astonished Whitman himself. Especially has modern poetry been influenced by the impressionistic and fragmentary phases of Whitman's work. Scattered in Whitman's poems are numerous brief, clear-cut pictures—miniatures, etchings—which convey a single vivid impression of reality. In sharpness of impression, in brevity, poems, like the *Ship Starting*, *The Runner*, *A Farm Picture*, *Cavalry Crossing A Ford*, and *Look Down Fair Moon*, might have been written by a twentieth century imagist.

Whitman has been the subject of sharp controversies. The humanists deplore Whitman's apparent surrender to a mere flux of impressions, and bemoan his unwillingness to think, analyse, and ponder. In Whitman's own day, Lowell, after reading *Leaves of Grass* for the third time, could still find no poetry in it. In the twentieth century, Norman Forster has said : "Turn where one will in his poems, one will look in vain for indications of any discipline intellectual or ethical, making for selfmastery and spiritual vision." On the other hand, Whitman received the approbation of the British critics, Dowden and Symonds, and to some extent of the poet Swinburne. Later American authors, particularly the radicals, often looked to Whitman as a sort of godfather.

Whitman's claims as an artist cannot be disregarded because of the unevenness of his poetry. If we ignore all his inferior passages, the remaining work is both fine and massive. That remainder is an effective expression of the values, and the immense energies, of romantic, mid-nineteenth-century America. Whitman renders many varieties of what may be called the romantic mood in poetry—its sense of wonder, its mystical elevation, its spontaneous response to Nature, its love of beauty and strangeness : and he expresses these moods in a language that produces new effects of freedom and resourcefulness. Nor should we forget that his poetry contains a body of ideas and feelings which, instead of dividing and frustrating human beings, tends to unite and satisfy them.

Whitman made a striking effort to liberate poetry from the tameness, the preciousness and the antiquarianism which had been afflicting it in the second half of the nineteenth century both in England and in America. He tried to create for the modern democratic world a new poetry, freed from the restraints of the feudal, aristocratic past, in order to express the life of the masses in the thickly populated cities of the young United States. He discarded rhyme and traditional metre, and thought that he had created an entirely new poetic form. Actually, he was influenced by tradition far more than he imagined. His long irregular unrhymed lines remind us of the rhythm of Longfellow's accentual hexametres, Carlyle's rhapsodies, Ossian-Macpherson's prose poems, and the majestic music of the Jacobean English Bible. But he did bring into poetry the energy and the savagery of the natural man. He threw his whole energy into the expression of his healthy, uninhabited vision of the external world :

> Smile O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth !
> Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees !
> Earth of departed sunset—earth of the mountains mistytopt !
> ....
> Smile, for your lover comes !
> ....
> I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also.
> ....
> What blurt is this about virtue and about vice ?
> Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent.

The strength of Whitman lies in his courage, his simplicity, his universality and his healthy, life-giving joy in the whole varied pageant of animate and inanimate things. His irregular unrhymed rhythms are too loose and too undisciplined to be a suitable instrument for great poetic art, but they are full of suggestions for a new prosody descending from the large free rhythms of English poetic prose. His weakness lies in his barbaric and uncultivated personality and his spiritual emptiness.

It is significant that one of his most characteristic poems is called *Song of Myself*. Although he thinks himself free, he is actually (except when exalted by great theme as in his funeral ode on Lincoln) enslaved by his own anarchic and limited personality, and the result is that much of his poetry is, as he himself put it, a mere 'barbaric yawp.'

Whitman's poetry had a great influence in Europe as well as in America. This influence quickened every current of contemporary art. Whitman has been acclaimed by a great and growing public. His has been hailed as prophet, as pioneer as rebel, as fiery humanist not only in America, but in England and throughout Europe. The whole scheme of *Leaves of Grass* is inclusive rather than exclusive ; its form is elemental, dynamic, free.

And yet, as late as 1900, an eminent critic could speak of Whitman's "eccentric insolence of phrase and temper", adding that in temperament and style Whitman was "an exotic member of that sterile brotherhood which eagerly greeted him abroad."

To the craftsmen, Whitman's chief contribution was his form. Hailing him as the father of the free verse movement they placed their emphasis on his flexible sonority, his orchestral timber, his tidal rhythms, his piling up of details into a symphonic structure. To the philosophers, he was first of the modern prophets, a rhapsodic mystic with a magnificently vulgar sense of democracy. To the psychologist, he was the most revealing of autobiographers ; "Whoever touches this book, touches a man", he wrote. To the lay reader, he was a protagonist of the "divine average" ; celebrating himself—hearty, gross, noble, "sane and sensual to the core"—the celebrated humanity.

Whitman knew that his "barbaric yawp" was untranslatable, unconforming, impossible to transfix with a phrase or a theory. The same contradictions which marked his personality are evident in his poems. *Leaves of Grass* sets out to be the manifesto of the ordinary man, "the divine average", yet it is doubtful if the ordinary man, "understands, or responds to, its rhetoric. Whitman's philosophy has not attracted any large common audience. Few of the "powerful uneducated persons" for whom Whitman's "democratic Gospel" was intended can appreciate or admire his extraordinary mixture of self-adulation and impotence, abnormality and mysticism.

"Thus Whitman rises above his defects. The reader forgets the lesser flaws, the lumbering failures ; the illumined phrases burn clear : the pictures, once etched upon the imagination, are there to stay. Above all, the *effect* remains, an effect not reducible to phrases, a sense of released power, irresistible and benevolent, immense in affirmation...Such poetry, whatever its lapses, has the stuff of permanence. It will persist not only because of its rebellious and compelling power, but because poet has transcended his material. The personal contact is achieved, as Whitman knew it would be : 'Who touches this book, touches a man.' Whitman created out of the self of his experience that vividly personal figure which is truly one of the few supremely great things in modern poetry—the figure of himself. But his work was larger than the man. Whitman was not dilating his value when he claimed to contain multitude."

Although Whitman regarded himself as the poet of his own age and his native America, there are poems which are so representative of human nature in all ages that they approach universal significance. Among the best of these is the *Passage to India* (1871), in which the ancient search of the explorer becomes a symbol both of the human soul's exploration in search of God, and of the vast unfolding of cosmic purpose. In loftiness of thought, in majesty of utterance, the *Passage to India* is among the noblest of American poems. Line after line is Miltonic in its sublimity :

We too take ship, O soul !
Joyous we too launch out on trackless seas !
Fearless, for unknown shores, on waves of ecstasy to sail
Amid the wafting winds, (thou pressing me to thee,
I thee to me, O soul,)
Caroling free, singing our song of God......

The three elegies, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* (1860), *O Captain ! My Captain* ! (1865) and *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd* (1865) also have a universal appeal. Underneath the surface, the first of these elegies is a chant of the eternal mystery of things—love and longing, life, and, above all, death. The second is a simple dirge written to commemorate Abraham Lincoln, the fallen leader of democracy. The third is also a commemoration of Lincoln, but it has a far greater scope, comparable to Milton's *Lycidas*, and Shelley's *Adonais*. In this elegy, Whitman weaves a web of solemn harmony about his three *motifs*, the lilac, the star, and the bird. He suggests his own and the nation's sorrow, combines the memory of Lincoln with the brood and ample beauties of the American continent, and celebrates death as an escape from suffering to rest :

> And the soul turning to thee, O vast and well-veiled Death
> And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.

In a number of brief poems on the Civil War, Whitman invests some particular event with universal significance. His war poetry contains no ringing calls of battle and no moving tales of heroic adventure. He does not speak of the glory of war, but of its gruesomeness. He gives us unambitious but realistic and vivid pictures of the march, the bivouac, and the field hospital. Over them all dwell a brooding pity and a deep sense of mystery which lend them the sense of a universal tragedy. Here again, as in Melville's *Moby Dick*, or Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, is to be felt that lofy, tragic sense of life, that high seriousness, which belongs only to the greatest works of art. The most moving scenes in these war poems are the *Bivouac on a Mountain Side*, *Come Up from the Fields Father*, *Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night*, *The Wound-Dresser*, and *A Sight in Camp in the Day-break Gray and Dim*.

Although Whitman grew continuously through youth and middle age in all the qualities of mind, heart and soul, yet his faith and philosophy, as well as his personal character, remained essentially the same throughout. His passion for freedom, his belief in nature, and his faith in immortality, though modified from time to time by increasing respect for the laws of society, of science, and of art, are so interwoven in the texture of his life as to give it unity and strength above all diversity and seeming contradiction. The course of his development is marked by two major crises, one of which belongs to the years 1847-55, and the other to the period of the Civil War. In the first through the elevation of self, he attained freedom for the body and the mind : in the second, through the abnegation of self he attained freedom for the heart and the soul. The direction of his evolution was always from the real to the ideal and from the material to the spiritual, and it was his conviction that such was also the direction of evolution in nature.

Walt Whitman exerted a greater influence on the development of modern poetry than any other poet of a century ago. Democratic poets in France, Germany, Spain, and several other countries have hailed Whitman as a forerunner or show his influence in their work. And the entire realistic tradition in American literature, in prose as well as poetry, has been supported and strengthened by Whitman. And yet Whitman has suffered greatly from the hostility that he encountered from an influential group of literary critics in the United States for a whole century. As an American commentator pointed out in 1955 : "In the century since the first, slim, privately printed volume of *Leaves of Grass* appeared, Walt Whitman has become throughout the world America's most widely read, most deeply discussed poet. But the hundred years have not removed the ambiguities of his place in his own country. By a consensus of intellectual opinion, he is our greatest poet, yet the fashionable critics and most of the biographers do not understand him, and in many cases actually dislike him." The literary conservatives have not been able to reconcile themselves to the Whitman who liberated

American senses and sensibilities from the deep freeze of Puritanism, sang the beauty of every-day-things and work, brought democracy and the common people into poetry, hailed the working people as the most important force in society, greeted the revolutionary events and developments of his time, and dedicated himself to international comradeship. The important forces in American literature today accept the Whitman tradition. Whitman's weaknesses and contradictions are outweighed a hundred times over by the strength and depth that he brought to American and world literature. As a literary historian writes : "In Walt Whitman's verse we must learn to accept the ridiculous as well as the sublime, and to cherish the note of absurdity as the mark of genius."

Ezra Pound, a fascist and therefore a foe of democracy, expressed the following opinions about Whitman :

(1) "And yet if a man has written lines like Whitman's to the 'Sun-Set-Breeze', one has to love him. I think we have not yet paid enough attention to the deliberate artistry of the man, not in details but in the large."

(2) "He is disgusting. He is an exceedingly nauseating pill."

The second opinion reminds us of the New York critic who described the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* as "the odoriferous classic" which celebrates "the proletarians who make the world almost uninhabitable by their vulgarity." A well-known poet,[1] speaking in 1953, said : "Most of Whitman's poems stand among the masterpiece of literature ; his pseudo-philosophical-political rambling we can forgive." A well-known critic[2] commenting on *Leaves of Grass* declared : "*Leaves of Grass* is more often than not relaxed and flabby ; it is uncertain of itself on many of its pages ; it is, frankly, a bore."

"Whitman, as he himself recognised, was an artist of many contradictions. As a pioneer of the modern, he was not always successful even in his mode of expression. He wrote some of the most magnificent lines of poetry as well as some of the clumsiest. Materialism and idealism, realism, romanticism, and strains of mysticism contend with each other in his works. His materialism, realism and democracy were the sources of his greatness and undiminished vitality."

Walt Whitman was deeply patriotic in the most religious sense of that word. The United States, for him, was the haven of democracy. Its unity was the great fact of the nineteenth century. But now, in the fifties, he saw his country hopelessly divided by the conflict over slavery, unable to meet the great emergency, because of the greed and selfishness in the North and arrogance in the South. When the Civil War began, Whitman's morale rose because the challenge to unity had been accepted, and he was soon aware of the emergence of a great man in Abraham Lincoln. When, in 1862, Whitman arrived in Washington, he witnessed the corruption and the chaos prevailing in the administration. He found consolation only in the courage, love, and a simple goodness of the great majority of common men as he watched over them, sick or dying in the hospitals. In his bitter poem *Respondez*, he writes :

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[1] **Karl Shapiro.**

[2] **Mark Van Doren.**

> Let the people sprawl with yearning, aimless hands !
> (Stifled, O days ! O lands ! in every public and private
> corruption !

Only the common man and a statesman with the best qualities of the common man sustained his idealism. To the distress caused by political event must be added Whitman's personal griefs and disappointments, some of them due to love and loss.

Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking (1859) is a record of loss and love and shows the deepening of every noble emotion. The ardent sensuality of *Song of Myself* has been sublimated here into "the unknown want, the destiny of me."

When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd (1865) was written as an elegy on the death of President Lincoln, it was not a patriotic poem in the usual sense. It sings of the love of comrades, which is the spiritual binding of democracy, and also the death of a "great companion", the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands." The gray-brown bird in the shadowy cedars provides the elegiac commentary. The poem praises the "strong deliveress" death, and its message is always love.

The *Passage to India* (1871) contains Whitman's most eloquent idealism. The theme here is in the question : "Whither O mocking life ?" The marriage of the seas in the Suez Canal, the crossing of the continent by steel, do not satisfy ; they are but shows of a greater dream. There must be passage to more than India. The soul, "that actual me", must voyage beyond its material successes in order to amplify its love, its ideals, its "purity, perfection, strength." So "sail forth—steer for the deep waters only."

Chanting the Square Deific (1865-1866) is an interesting commentary on Whitman's philosophy. Not a great poem, it describes the stern morality of a Jehovah, Christ the consolator, the Holy Spirit inspiring, and, for the fourth boundary of truth, Satan, the comrade of criminals, brother of slaves, despised, proud, equal with any, "nor time no change shall ever change me or my words." As body and soul are aspects of the same verity, so are evil and good. The years 1850-1870 were a period of both distress and exaltation, but these years brought him wisdom. Passion he had before. His philosophy of living in the years of the first *Leaves of Grass* was what the eighteenth century would have called enthusiastic. That was its strength, the poet's exuberant faith in the onsurge of life as an end in itself and an evidence of God come from the depths of his consciousness. Whitman's earlier poems have the faults of rhetorical over-emphasis. They are aggressive as a debater is aggressive who talks to score points. Furthermore, he had not yet squared his own personal problems with his religion of simple and passionate love. He needed to be broken away from his egoism by blows from without. He needed to take into his imagination death as well as life.

His poetry deepened because his imagination now reached out of his too physical world as he heard another song "covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven." Death began to seem as important as life, religion more important than self-expression. His poetry deepened because his imagination was now chastened into reaching far beyond and beneath his sensory experiences. The growing and maturing of art is of great importance in the case of Walt Whitman. He is a poet first, and an apostle of love, democracy, and death only because of his poetry.

3

"Leaves of Grass"

Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*[1] (1855) was at once the fulfilment of American romanticism and the beginning of a revolt against it. However, the interest aroused by this volume was by no means proportionate to its importance. In the first place, his readers were not prepared for the startling conclusions he drew from his familiar premises. Secondly, they were not prepared for the rough and unmetrical verse that he employed. *Leaves of Grass* got almost the same reception as the *Lyrical Ballads* of Wordsworth and Coleridge. "Most people were indifferent ; a few were bitterly hostile ; a few were enthusiastic." In Emerson's opinion, the book was "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed." Whitman went on steadily to enlarge his volume, re-publishing it again and again until the end of his life, so that the final volume of *Leaves of Grass* may be regarded as containing his complete message. He was praised by Thoreau, Bryant, Swinburne, Edward Dowden, J. A. Symonds, and others. He became the leader of a sort of cult, and his residence became a place of pilgrimage for young literary aspirants. But if he received high praise on the one hand, he was a target of much criticism on the other, so that a true estimate of him is yet difficult to arrive at.

The irregular, unrhymed lines in which most of *Leaves of Grass* is written, in accordance with the author's belief that the American spirit could not be bound by the shackles of traditional verse-forms, are often uncouth, but have a noble music and cadence of their own. At first the public saw only the weeds, but a letter of commendation from Emerson, printed in the second edition, attracted more favour, and the unequal and in parts chaotic work, in which the author tried to express his democratic ideals as naturally as the grass grows, came to be accepted as a stimulating message to humanity. Whitman sacrificed rhyme and metre and used a remarkable freedom in expression, but retained a regard for rythme. The work was influenced to some extent by Oriental transcendentalism.

Like so many American writers, Whitman was appreciated first in Europe, more slowly at home. Surrounding himself with a small but devoted group which included Traubel, Burroughs, Bucke, and the British visitor Carpenter, he felt his influence at last taking hold.

The reviews of the first *Leaves of Grass* showed the emergence of a new poet, who was original if also shocking, bold if egoistic, powerful even if powerful in wrong directions. The first *Leaves of Grass* contained a brilliant Preface, stating the theory of poetry for democracy and for America. It contained also twelve poems, of which the first, "Song of Myself", was obviously an attempt to describe a symbolic man of the nineteenth century. This symbolic man was named Walt Whitman in the poem. Of the other poems, the most significant were, "I Sing the Body Electric", which was the most shocking, and "Who Learns My Lesson Complete", in which the poet steps on to the platform to explain his idea of life. A second edition was published in the following year (1856), with new poems, some of them among Whitman's best, such as, "Salut au Monde !" "Song of the Broad-Axe," "Crossing Brookln Ferry", and "Song of the Open Road." This edition failed with the buying public as completely as the first.

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[1] *Leaves of Grass* is the title used for the entire poetic work of Walt Whitman.

In 1860, Whitman issued a much bigger volume, with important additions, especially under the headings of "Chants Democratic", "Enfans d' Adam", dealing with the love of women, and "Calamus" inspired by the love of men. The Civil War found its best expressions in literature in *Drum-Taps*, of 1865, and the *Lincoln Poems*, both groups included in an edition of 1867. Some of the finest of *Drum-Taps* were the result of Whitman's experience as a visitor to the sick and wounded in the hospitals in Washington where he looked after thousands of men. In 1876, he published the sixth edition of the *Leaves of Grass*, containing the farewell poems of his creative period, "Passage to India", "Prayer of Columbus" and "Song of the Redwood Tree", with other new poems. In 1881, the *Leaves of Grass* received its final re-arrangement, and in 1892, the year of his death, got its final text in a ninth edition.

Whitman's occasional verbosity and frequent repetitions in *Leaves of Grass* are confusing to the reader. In fact, no major author so thoroughly needs an editing as Whitman, such an editing as Matthew Arnold gave to the poetry of Wordsworth. *Leaves of Grass* aroused both violent opposition and unmeasured praise. The book is as full of faults as of genius. It met with opposition for several reasons. The ideas expressed in these poems might have been familiar but they got their first emotional impact from Whitman. Besides, Whitman used an idiom which being unfamiliar was not liked by many. Furthermore, many poems run counter to the moral conventions of the period. The editions of 1860 included "Calamus" and "Children of Adam" which appeared to be incentives to sexuality and perhaps to perversion. The hostile critics neglected new poems of moving beauty and emotional depth such as "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry". Critics of later editions did not recognise the deepening of Whitman's religious feeling and his saner intuitions of human nature in such superb poems of the late fifties and the sixties as "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking", "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd," and "Passage to India." Nor did they note the growth in artistry. They gave only faint praise to some of the most realistic yet most uplifted poetry of war in *Drum-Taps*. The critics discussed only his sexuality, his egoism, and his exuberant optimism.

Whitman compared the finished book to a cathedral long-a building, and on another occasion to a tree, with its cumulative stages of growth. Beginning with the third edition (1860), he grouped his poems under such titles as "Chants Democratic", "Enfans d'Adam" (later "Children of Adam"), "Calamus", "Poems of Joy", and "Sea-Drift". Some of his later group titles were highly connotative, such as "Birds of Passage", "By the Roadside", "Autumn Rivulets", "From Noon to Starry Night", and "Songs of Parting", suggesting a life allegory. Whatever else may be said of Whitman's groupings, some of his best imagery is in his group titles and his first lines. The arrangement gave him personal satisfaction and he specified on his death-bed that the 1892 edition was definitive and that only it should be reprinted after his death.

Whitman himself thus described the character of his work: *Leaves of Grass* is, or seeks to be, simply a faithful and doubtless self-willed record. In the midst of all, it gives one man's the author's—identity, ardours, observations, faiths, and thoughts, coloured hardly at all with any decided colouring from other faiths or other identities. Plenty of songs had been sung—beautiful, matchless songs—adjusted to other lands than the United States—another spirit and stage of evolution ; but I would sing and leave out or put in, quite solely with reference to America and today...For grounds for *Leaves of Grass*, as a poem, I abandoned the conventional themes, which do not appear in it : none of the stock ornamentation, or choice plots of love or war, or high, exceptional personages of old-world song ; nothing, as I may say, for-beauty's sake—no legend, or myth, or romance, nor euphemism, nor rhyme. But the broadest average of humanity and its identities in the now ripening nineteenth century, and especially in each of their countless examples, and practical occupations in the United States today."

He defines *Leaves of Grass* as "an attempt of a naive, masculine, affectionate, contemplative, sensual, imperious person to cast into literature not only his own grit and arrogance, but his own flesh and form, untrapped, regardless of models, regardless of modesty or law ; and ignorant, as at first it appears of all outside of the fiercely loved land of his birth......

"I saw, from the time my enterprise and questionings positively shaped themselves, that the trunk and centre whence the answer was to radiate, and to which all should return from straying however far a distance, must be an identical body and soul, a personality—which personality, after many considerations and ponderings, I deliberately settled should be myself—indeed could not be any other......

"*Leaves of Grass* has mainly been the outpouring of my own emotional and other personal nature—an attempt to put a person, a human being myself in the later half of the nineteenth century, in America—freely, fully, and truly on record. I could not find any similar personal record in current literature that satisfied me."

These definitions applied to the extended later editions rather than to the original poem which was outlined and partly written in the 1847 note-book.

In general, critics agree, *Leaves of Grass* begins by celebrating the individual and then proceeds to indicate various ways of union between the individual and nature, and between the one and the many in society. *Song of Myself* is, of course, the key-note of the first part and of the celebration of individuality. *Childern of Adam* concentrates on physical love, uniting men and women in families with children. *Calamus* describes the moral spiritual love of comrades. Then comes a group of poems emphasizing general qualities of social economic, and cultural unity of which *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* may be taken as typical. In *Sea Drift*, however, and especially in *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, there is a return to the individual, whose development is completed by a realisation, the result of some great sorrow and suffering of the meaning of death. *Drum-Taps* generalises this knowledge in the suffering of the nation at war, and expresses it in the elegy for Lincoln, *When Litacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd* (a companion poem to *Out of the Cradle*). Then come the thoughts and feelings of declining years, the high point among which is the cosmic or metaphysical union of self and universe or God, in *Passage to India*.

Though at the outset he had announced himself as the poet of the soul no less than the poet of the body, he devoted the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* largely to the celebration of the body and its material environment, content in the main to state the theory of the soul and its spiritual relations. He said afterwards that it was his original intention to write one volume of songs of the body and a separate volume of songs of the soul, but there is no evidence of such an intention in the first edition or its preface. From the beginning, however, he was firm in his demand that the immortal soul of man should be subject to no discipline except its own. Hence, there shall be no more formulas, no priests, no prayer ; the man of the future shall include all gods and all faiths and be himself greater than any.

It seems probable that only a Christian culture could have produced *Leaves of Grass*. Yet the poem is almost totally without conventional theological terminology. God is an emotional, not a logical, concept, and Whitman even does not attempt a definition :

> And I say to mankind, Be not curious about God,
> For I who am curious about each am not curious about
>   God.
> (No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about
>   God and about death).
> I hear and behold God in every object yet, understand God
>   not in the least,
> Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful
>   than myself.

(*Section 48 : Song of Myself*)

Emerson, on receiving a copy of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, paid a glowing tribute to Whitman. He found in the book "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed", and "incomparable things said incomparably well." According to Emerson, the book had the best merit, namely "of fortifying and encouraging". However, Emerson felt much dismayed to read the "Children of Adam" poems which appeared in the second edition of the book and which shocked many readers because of their free treatment of sex. Emerson tried to persuade Whitman to omit these poems from the third edition, but Whitman refused to do so and Emerson's admiration cooled after that.

Time and again Whitman refused to eliminate from new edition of *Leaves of Grass* lines with sexual content. To him a sexless individuality was inconceivable. "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul", he wrote and "...Of physiology from top to toe I sing."

Whitman conceived of literature as "a means whereby men may be revealed to each other as brothers"; and more simply *Leaves of Grass* may be described as a long poem to brotherhood. Yet both content and artistic method reflect a rich fusion of social, political and aesthetic conflicts of the time.

The one cardinal principle that Whitman tries to illustrate in *Leaves of Grass* is that the only fitting poetry for democratic America is that which shall "tally and express" nature in its cosmic fullness, including its spiritual as well as its material aspects; for after all, nature is the only complete and actual poem.

Leaves of Grass as a whole is the bible of democracy (the term is Whitman's own). The problem of democracy is to develop supreme individuals on the one hand and on the other to bind these separate selves into a social union. *Leaves of Grass* has for its chief aim the stimulation of personality. The purpose of the first poems is to arouse, dilate, expand and greaten the reader. Consequently they radiate personal energy—they are proud, strenuous, joyful, optimistic. The function of the second group of poems is to provide for union. They show the identification of each with all, with Nature, and with God. The first stage of union is in sex—union in the natural. A higher, more spiritual identity, is found in comradeship or union in the spiritual domain. Other forms of union appear in the songs of occupations and in the chants of nature. The war was a war for union: the *Drum-Taps* inculcate, therefore, identity in nationality. The songs of death and parting declare the fusion of soul and body in a cosmic order. As pride was the key-word of the first group, love becomes the sign of the second series. To sing the Great Ideas, the transcendental Union—that, thought Whitman, must be the mission of poets.

Whitman was pledged to democracy first of all because he believed it would safeguard the freedom of the individual, on whom the greatness of the State depends. "Produce great persons, the rest follows", he said. Hence egotism was a part of his role as the poet of an individualistic democracy, but it was also an inherent trait in his character. The "I" in *Leaves of Grass* is both the microcosmic Walt Whitman, citizen of the universe, and actual Walt Whitman, citizen of Brooklyn; the poet of great persons must himself be a great person. He was fairly intoxicated with admiration of his own form and flesh. Admitting that the old gods did the work of their days, he affirms that the modern man is potentially a greater god, and offers himself as exemplary evidence.

But the individual cannot eventually assert his freedom until he has overthrown the past with its lumber of tradition and its web of restraints. Whitman is, therefore, the advocate of revolt ; he is the arch-rebel. His is the pioneer's boundless impatience of restraint, and his is the revolutionary's hatred of kings and priests. He takes no account of man-made laws, and where others give duties he gives impulses. His motto was, "Resist much, obey little." The social conventions were among the first to be discarded.

Some time between 1855 and 1860, judging only from the evidence of the poems, Whitman experienced intensely the sorrows of love, bereavement, and death which had been largely theoretical to him earlier. There is a mood of depression and resignation in the new poems of the 1860-61 edition of *Leaves of Grass* that is totally lacking in the earlier volume. All brashness is gone in the sombre brooding of *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* over the loss of a beloved mate and the final and joyful acceptance of death. Whitman is perhaps at his greatest here because he now seems at last to receive in deep humility the universal truths he had demanded so vigorously before.

In 1859 Whitman began to write the *Calamus* group of poems specially devoted to friendship and the establishment of the love of comrades as an institution. The sense of touch, so vital to sexual love, has also its place in manly love, for the proper salute of comrades is a light kiss on the lips. This type of love is indeed so definitely physical that when he is not in the near presence of his lovers he doubts the reality of his own body. He is jealous and sleepless when his comrades, are away, and is at times so terrified by the power and strangeness of his emotion that he does not dare tell it. He warns the new person drawn to him that he is a difficult lover and perhaps not all that he seems. "You would have to give up all else", he explains. "I alone would expect to be your sole and exclusive standard". Here the man Whitman is identified with his book, so that the word "lover" is made to include his devoted reader as well as his devoted friend. He was convinced that the love of comrades would advance American democracy by reconciling the conflicting interests of the individual and the nation. Perhaps the main purport of the United States is to develop a new and exalted type of friendship latent in all men, yet, previously unknown. When men from different sections of the country learn to love and understand one another, they will be able to love and understand united America.

Contemptuous of tradition, literary, moral, or political, Whitman regarded himself as the prophet of America, which he believed would give the world a free society exisiting for the mass-production of great personalities. This democracy of the future was to be welded together by the love of comrades and by equality.

4

The 1855 Preface to "Leaves of Grass"

In the 1855 Preface, Whitman explains his conception of the poets and poetry of the future. The greatest poet, he affirms, is the most complete lover of the universe ; he draws his materials directly from nature. He must be a seer who can see the cosmic plan which unites the past, the present, and the future in hormonious sequence. He must be endowed with organic health and a perfect sense of the unity of man and nature, and his personal character must be representative of the national character. (It is significant that the qualities of American character which Whitman names are the qualities that predominate in his own personality).

It is the function of the poet to perceive what is permanent in the flux of things. He is the voice of liberty, the exemplar of equality, and the fulfilment of the laws of science. In him are reconciled the measureless pride of the soul, and the equally measureless sympathy of the soul. In his art, he is a realist. To this end, the best style is that which is the simplest and most natural, without rhyme, metre, or other ornament. The form of the perfect poem, like that of a perfect animal or tree, is a free and organic growth in which each part is in proportion and harmonious with the whole design. In short, the whole purpose of the poet is to make poems that "tally nature".

Such a poet Whitman hoped to be, and such poems, tallying nature, he set out to compose. The unifying purpose of *Leaves of Grass* throughout was to show how man might achieve for himself the most complete freedom possible within the limits of natural law. His plan provided three channels for the fulfilment of this purpose : democracy love, and religion. These became the dominant themes of all his poems. The book is consequently a trilogy, showing how freedom may be secured for the body through democracy, for the heart through love, and for the soul through religion. By such channels the primary attributes of Whitman's characters—egotism, sensuousness, and sentiment—found a natural outlet.

In the 1855 Preface, Whitman proclaims one of the cardinal principles in his poetics. He says : "The land and sea, the animals, fishes and birds, the sky of heaven and the orbs, the forests, mountains and rivers are not small themes but folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects……They expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls." Thus Whitman affirms the necessity for the poet to go beyond objects, and to perceive relationships and probe connections, to discover and convey the spiritual significance of the physical fact. Accordingly, Whitman appears at his best when he allows his mind free play over a seeming multitude of "physical facts", probing and discovering submerged relationships and bringing out hidden significances. Three examples of Whitman's use of the catalogue technique for this purpose are ; *I Hear America Singing*, *The World Below the Brine*, and *I Sit and Look Out*.

It is generally recognised that the entire Preface (1855) to *Leaves of Grass* is a veiled account of Whitman's concept of his own role as poet. Certainly he includes himself in the category of poets about whom he says : "The poets of the kosmos advance through all interpositions and coverings and turmoils and stratagems to first principles." Although he does not use the word "epic", it is clear throughout the 1855 Preface that Whitman believes his *Leaves of Grass* to have the basic nature and general scope of the traditional national epic. He certainly wished his book to bear a unique relationship with America.

Quoted below are important extracts from the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*.

"The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations……Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes……Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves.

Other states indicate themselves in their deputies, but the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors, but always most in the common people. Their manners, speech, dress, friendships—the freshness and candor of their physiognomy—their deathless attachment to freedom—their aversion to anything indecorous or soft or mean—their self-esteem and wonderful sympathy—their delight in music—the terrible significance of their elections—the President's taking off his hat to them not they to him—these too are unrhymed poetry.

The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people.

Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest. Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall. Of all mankind the great poet is the equable man. He bestows on every object or quality its fit proportions, neither more nor less. He is the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key. He is the equalizer of his age and land. If peace is the routine, out of him speaks the spirit of peace. In war he is the most deadly force of the war. If the time becomes slothful and heavy, he knows how to arouse it......he can make every word he speaks draw blood. Whatever stagnates in the flat of custom or obedience or legislation, he never stagnates.

The greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into anything that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe. He is a seer......he is individual ...he is complete in himself...the others are as good as he, only he sees it and they do not.

The land and sea, the animals, fishes and birds, the sky of heaven and the orbs, the forests, mountains and rivers, are not small themes but folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects... they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls.

The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges and melons and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form.

The known universe has one complete lover and that is the greatest poet. He is no irresolute or suspicious lover. Nothing can jar him...suffering and darkness cannot—death and fear cannot. The sea is not surer of the shore or the shore of the sea than he is of the fruition of his love and of all perfection and beauty.

Past and present and future are not disjoined but joined. The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is. He says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realise you. He places himself where the future becomes present ......The greatest poet does not moralise or make applications of morals...he knows the soul.

Nothing is better than simplicity...nothing can make up for excess or for the lack of definiteness. To speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and insouciance of the movements of animals and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside is the flawless triumph of art.

The American bards shall be marked for generosity and affection and for encouraging competitors. They shall be kosmos without monopoly or secrecy.

The messages of great poets to each man and woman are, Come to us on equal terms, Only then can you understand us, We are no better than you, What we enclose, what we enjoy you may enjoy.

Exact science and its practical movements are no checks on the greatest poet but always his encouragement and support. The sailor and traveller, the anatomist, chemist, astronomer, geologist, phrenologist, spiritualist, mathematician, historian and lexicographer are not poets, but they are the lawgivers of poets and their construction underlies the structure of every perfect poem.

In the make of the great masters the idea of political liberty is indispensable. Poets are the voice and exposition of liberty. The attitude of great poets is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots.

As the attributes of the poets of the kosmos concenter in the real body and soul and in the pleasure of things, they possess the superiority of genuineness over all fiction and romance.

The great poets are also to be known by the absence in them of tricks and by the justification of perfect personal candor.

The prescient poet projects himself centuries ahead and judges performer or performance after the changes of time...A great poem is for ages and ages in common and for all degrees and complexions and all departments and sects and for a woman as much as a man and a man as much as a woman.

There will soon be no more priests. There work is done. A superior breed shall take their place. A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest. Through the divinity of themselves shall the kosmos and the new breed of poets be interpreters of men and women and of all events and things. They shall find their inspiration in real objects today, symptoms of the past and future. They shall arise in America and be responded to from the remainder of the earth.

The English language befriends the grand American expression ...it is brawny enough and limber and full enough.

The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it."

5

"*Song of Myself*"

Song of Myself is one of the most self-revealing poems in literature, and the key to an understanding of Walt Whitman. In its final arrangement it is a poem of 52 groups of long lines, each group a paragraph introducing a turn in the thought. The poem begins with an assertion which is a challenge to contemporary (and earlier) literature, which Whitman regarded as "class poetry" representing a world where literature had spoken for the exceptional man, not for the simple, separate person or the "en-masse".

> I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
> And what I assume you shall assume,
> For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
> I loafe and invite my soul......
> I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
> Nature without check, with original energy.

In other words, he wants to be the voice of democracy, and he wants to speak at all hazards what he finds there representative of the "divine average". What he finds there is a world of sense perception in every man that is part of the eternal time stream and is far more important than what he calls the "latest dates" and the routine of daily living. Through love and its instrument, the senses, comes, the knowledge that all men, with God also, are brothers. Old maids, drivers, farmers, hunters, the Yankee clipper, the clam digger, the trapper, the runaway slave, beautiful young men bathing and the woman who joins them in fancy, the Negro drayman—all these are kin to the grass that grows wherever the land is, the common air that surrounds the earth.

Therefore the self dramatised Walt Whitman sees himself in all people and in all life, and feels intense, passionate love for such beauty. He trusts the en-masse :

> I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy.
> By God ! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.

Through him, voices of prisoners and slaves, the diseased and the despairing, the voices of sex and lust, speak and are clarified. He wanders over America, its work and festivals, and is pleased with all he meets. He would save the depressed and the dying by the power of his love.

Song of Myself is, in spirit and in its long catalogues of activities, an expansionist poem. It is also a prophetic poem, because Whitman urges a vigorous country to spiritualise its energy. Furthermore, it is a dramatic poem. With all its extravagance, its artistic imperfections, and its incoherences, it is not propaganda, or argument, but a chanting of victory and aspiration, in which Whitman celebrates himself as a symbol of the "divine average." There are echoes and paraphrases of Emerson in the *Song of Myself*. Whitman felt that blood and spirit were equally important in a true democracy. The common man, lusty, full-blooded, was as important as the saint, the intellectual, or the aristocrat. The senses must have their full development as part of the expression of the soul. This belief was an extension of transcendentalism. Whitman carried his conception of God and man, body and soul, far beyond the limits of transcendental orthodoxy.

Whitman's strong capacity for self-dramatisation is reflected in *Song of Myself*. The strong sensuality of *Song of Myself* and many other poems, the deep sympathy with carnal man, indeed Whitman's whole argument for a democracy of the emotions, and particularly those emotions which are primarily sexual, were all much influenced by his powerful body and strong but highly complicated sexual nature. Health, vigour, lustiness are words that occur or are paraphrased throughout *Leaves of Grass*. When most mystical, most prophetic, Whitman most insists that it is his "beautiful blood" as much as his soul that is speaking. He had a zest for magnificent bodies, stimulated by his admiration for his own, which made him recoil from the intellectual and the refined, and gloat upon such manifestations as the fullbloodedness of New York—turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking, and breeding.

Song of Myself shocked, puzzled, amused, amazed, or profoundly impressed its few readers when it appeared.

Song of Myself is a collection of closely related short poems and contains really the gist of all that Whitman ever had to say. He pours into this long work the multiform experiences of American life. Although he shocks the reader by his insolent egoism of the opening lines, he is thinking of himself as a powerful and sensitive instrument for receiving impressions and communicating them, rather than as Walt Whitman of Brooklyn. He moves from himself to you and to others, to all humanity *en-masse* about him, to the brave violence of his nation, to love and death, to the pantheistic God in every object, to the future and to eternity. His thought moves outward in concentric circles from a concentration on the abstract value of his own self. Through all the intervening layers of friend, 'lover' the "En-Masse", nation, humanity, this idea of self moves from its fully realised inner core to the extreme outward limits of cosmic unity. The mystical experience rather than the logical mind must and can alone make this journey. The most limited and personal of poems becomes the larger and most nearly universal.

Song of Myself is, like so many of Whitman's poems, full of those enormous catalogues of America, sweeping over the country, describing its cities, sounds, scenes, in various geographical regions and professions and walks of life. These catalogues have a purpose. They are not simply there in order to build up a picture of the size or complexity or diversity of the country. The purpose behind them is an endeavour to cultivate an awareness of other people which takes you outside of yourself and brings about a new kind of relationship between you and the external world. For Whitman, what he sees becomes part of him, but in becoming part of him it changes him; he becomes a different and a more complex person. In observing the American world he identifies himself with what he observes. He *becomes* the people he observes.

It would be vain to look for some firm structural principle in *Song of Myself*. In Whitman's conception, this new kind of poem was more a process than a form. True enough, he revised it considerably before he decided upon a final version in 1881, but that does not mean that he was trying to tailor it to a form but rather that he wanted it to grow and move, as he and his world had grown and moved. The Whitman of *Song of Myself* surveys his whole world, his milieu and ambiance—but not according to any necessary order or chronology. He looks when he wills, and interprets as he wills. There is a movement here, but not a form. The world is too large, too much, to have an imitable order or pattern. It is just there. The hero's hope in *Song of Myself*, his "altogether moral and political" object, is to know that the world is there, and in the knowing, to know that he is there. Only thus can he create himself, only then can he find himself and discover as though for the first time, that he exists and is free—at once, in the worlds of the opening inscriptive poem of *Leaves of Grass* "a simple separate person and "En-Masse." *Song of Myself* is a poem in which the speaker wills himself to be at the mercy of his world; for he knows that in his world lies his only source of the range of experiences which will let him complete the cycle of self-recognition, identification with others, and self-definition.

The argument of *Song of Myself* may thus be outlined :

Sections 1—5 : The initial insight into the creative nature ("the procreant urge") of the self and the initiating of creative power which follows spontaneously from that insight.

Sections 6—16 : Recognition of the relation of the self to its world and a seeking after the changes which follow spontaneously upon that recognition.

Sections 17—25 : The roles of the self in and through its world; a return to the matter of 1—5, but with this difference that self-knowledge now exists objectively, a product not of sheer inwardness as in 1—5, but of a spontaneously formalised relation between the self and its world. Now the poet is not simply a force, but force defined in terms of its world; now he is fully a person and can name himself: "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan, the son."

Sections 26—52 : The poet (as person) fully at home in his newly-defined world, fully sure of himself and his "procreant urge". He no longer needs to seek his world (as in 6—16); he can openly and lovingly address it, as he at once creates and controls it and as he is created and controlled by it. He is thus a religion, God-like in himself : "I am an acme of things accomplished, and I am encloser of things to be."

The structure of *Song of Myself* does not, then, show the usual beginning, middle, and end. Nor does it possess the pattern of a paradox, tension, ambiguity, or irony. True that we expect these things from an achieved literary work. But there is no fixed rational scheme here whereby we may decide that a given section should or should not have begun where it begins and ended where it ends, or contained what it contains. It is this "formal" difficulty which has most often disturbed readers and sent them to a poem like *Out of the Cradle......*, with its tight, firm internal design. The argument of the poem is, however, in its own way entirely meaningful and quite of a piece with its epic intention. The language, the syntax, the articulation of *Song of Myself* are the means whereby Whitman tried to realise his notion of poetry and its unique form.

In the light of his performance in *Song of Myself*, Whitman's views on the poet and his language do make for a kind of unity. It is the unity of psychic exhaustion, of an act of self-discovery, self-involvement, and self-creation carried through to completion. Perhaps that is why, yielding so his (mistaken) need to give "finish" to the poem, he finally settled upon 52 sections for *Song of Myself*. Its unity is that of a year which, once having completed its seasons of birth, growth, and death, will inevitably come again.

This is a new kind of heroic poetry—not an epic, but an American equivalent of an epic. In this epic, the hero releases the full creative force of the self, defines the *realia* of his world and takes from them his name, his office, and his phenomenal existential qualities...As Whitman said generally of his poetry in *A Backward Glance Ov'r Travell'd Roads*, it is "to give ultimate vivification to facts, to science, and to common lives, endowing them with the glows and glories and final illustriousness which belong to every real thing and to real things only."

R. H. Pearce thus analyses this poem, Section by Section .

Song of Myself begins epically, but immediately (unlike the traditional epic) turns inwards, expecting its reader to do likewise :

> I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
> And what I assume, you shall assume,
> For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

The whole first section establishes the dominance of the self when for the first time it is overpoweringly discovered : the language of the section is composed in such a way as to convey the overpowering effect. For instance, all the verbs in the section apply only to self and its attributes. At the end of this section Whitman writes :

> Creeds and schools in abeyance,
> Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
> I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
> Nature without check with original energy.

In this stanza the absence of verbs for the items named in the first and last lines absolutely subordinates them to the newly-discovered self. What follows in the next sections is a retailing of a complete absorption into the self ("I am mad for it to be in contact with me") and a sense that the self possesses "the origin of all poems", (2) an elucidation of the timeless "Urge and urge and urge,/Always the procreant urge of the world", (3) a recognition of its difference from other souls "But they are not the Me myself", and (4) the final account of how the soul, turning inward I upon itself, discovers its true nature :

> I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
> How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,
> And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart,
> And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet. (*Section 5*)

The passage of parallelisms which follows takes its energy from this moment of self-generated apotheosis. The items that are named are chaotically scattered ; but the force of the parallelisms is to unify and relate them by means of the powers of the creative self :

> Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth.
> And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
> ....
> ....
> And mossy scabs of the worm fence......

Section 6 : A meditation on the meaning of the "real" world, taken at its simplest as a blade of grass ; here the self ventures to interpret, but is not quite sure ; but grass leads to grave, and grave leads to death, and death leads to continuity and identity :

> All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
> And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.

Section 7 : The subject is death, newly understood ; and through his understanding the poet, as self, sees that in the very continuity of life and death lies what unites him with all who are born to die. (In lines 140-44, the construction "For me" is repeated so often that it unifies the diverse).

Section 8 : The poet, as self, begins to explore a world compound of life and death, peace and violence ; as yet, he is to a degree an outsider—looking, peering, viewing, witnessing, and finally coming and departing.

Sections 9—11 : The poet is here, there, everywhere—on a farm, in the mountains, at sea—participating, helping, joining. In the notorious eleventh section, he is viewing twenty-eight handsome, friendly young men bathing ; here he is even more of an outsider, for whereas he had spoken in the first person in the previous sections here he speaks in the third—or rather, has a woman look for him and observes that her "unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies" ; it is as though the procreant urge of the self to create and transform itself is not yet quite powerful enough.

Sections 12—15 : The poet continues his exploits as voyeur, but now as one who can call himself "the caresser of life" (12). There are occasional interpretive interjections which make the self mindful of its object—for instance, of flying ducks, "I believe in those wing'd purposes" (13) ; the poet has discovered that "What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me" (14) and at the end of the great catalogue in 15, he can declare, "And of these one and all I weave the song of myself."

Section 16 : A brave attempt to comprehend objectively the relation between self and world, in which the poet moves from the relational to the identical. At first he says, "I am of", then declares that he is "stuffed" as others are stuffed, and then he establishes identity by sheer naming ; the process is beyond the logical necessity of a verb, being an "I am" beyond "I am". And finally. in the stanza beginning "I resist any thing better than my own diversity", there is a full recognition, achieved through the creative metamorphoses called forth in this phase of the poem, of the role and meaning of the self.

Sections 17—18 : A meditation upon the self, the community, and the community of selves. What is at stake is establishing the total inclusiveness of the relationship and of the identity so discovered.

Sections 19—24 : The subject is love of self and world and what that love entails—the recognition (in 20) that "I exist as I am, that is enough..." There follows in 23, a moment of victorious acceptance of the creative role of the self and of its difficult but joyous relation to its world : "I accept Reality and dare not question it..." This in turn leads in 24 and 25 to the poet's daring to name himself. The poet is now "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan, the son". He can now say, "I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and all so luscious". He is now "Divine...inside and out". His world has filtered "through" him. Hence the great joyous, comic pronouncement—one of the great moments in the history of the American spirit :

> Unscrew the locks from the doors !
> Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs
> Whoever degrades another degrades me,
> And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.

Section 25 : This moment is carried to completion : "*Walt you contain enough, why don't you let it out then* ?" What has merged is a man, a poet—no longer just a force, but now a substantial being a means and an end.

The remaining Sections treat of the poet, full of the sense c what he has accomplished and how he has accomplished it, in his nev relation to his world and his readers.

Sections 26—29 : The poet listens to, touches, is touched by th items which make up his world, and is, therefore, able to solve th mystery of being itself.

Sections 30—31 : The mystery of being is the mystery c creativity, and hence is no longer a mystery. Now the poet can botl believe in and be everything in his world, for its being is grounde in his relation to it. As he has come to know it, he has made it a aspect of himself and himself an aspect of it. Thus the "I believe and the "I incorporate" series of 31 is followed by an "In vain series—for since the poet believes and so incorporates, in vain woul anything in the world try to escape him.

Section 32 : Animals—"Why do I need your (the stallion's paces when I myself out-gallop them ?/Even as I stand or sit passing faster than you".

Section 33 : The poet's life in time and space—again a mov ment from the relational to the identical (I am by, where, over, a etc.—I visit, I fly, etc.—I understand, etc.—I am the man, I suffer' I was there). The poet is now a Tiresias[1] who acts.

Sections 34—36 : History, in the Alamo and a naval battle— was there.

Section 37 : A prison—I was there.

Section 38 : The poet has also had his Gethsemane[2] and h Crucifixion.

Section 39 : The poet as noble savage, a beloved primal being.

Section 40 : The poet meditates the creative self :

> I have embraced you, and henceforth possess you to m
> self,
> And when you rise in the morning you will find what
> tell you is so.

Section 41 : The poet as God-like "becoming already a creator Putting myself here and now to the ambush'd womb of the shadows'

Section 42 : The poet as God :

> I know perfectly well my own egotism,
> Know my omnivorous lines and must not write any less,
> And would fetch you whoever you are flush with myself.

Section 43 : The poet and the priests of the world—he tak on their role, his religion is all theirs put together and more. " cannot fail..."—another affirmatory catalogue of the ineluctab destiny of a seemingly chaotic world.

Section 44 : An almost formal definition of the man wh made by his vision, now re-creates it for others and makes it work them :

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1. Tiresias—In Greek legend, a soothsayer.
2. Gethsemane—The scene of the agony of Christ.

"I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I am encloser
of things to be."

Section 45 : The joy of that procreant urge discovered before in Section 2, but now known to be God-like, forever youthful and re-assertive. As he makes himself God-like, he is of God's Elect.

Section 46 : The poet again explores the milieu and ambiance, and finds them as measureless and inexhaustible as the poet's God-like, God-given creative power.

Section 47 : Having learned that the power of the poet-person is that of the teacher, the poet has earned the right to call himself thus for the first time :

I teach straying from me, yet who can stray from me ?
I follow you whoever you are from the present hour,
My words itch at your ears till you understand them.

Section 48 : The poet and God—it is enough to see God in his world and in himself.

Section 49 : The poet and death—he is not frightened ; he knows that always he will "ascend".

Section 50 : The poet's triumphant state :

It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is
eternal life—it is happiness.

Section 51 : The time is forever now for a man, a poet, in this state.

Section 52 : The poet, having created himself in and through his world, is inevitably forever here—in the process of life itself :

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I
love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles,
Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

6

"Children of Adam"

A group of sixteen poems by Whitman appeared under the main heading of "Children of Adam". The more important of these poems are : *From Pent-Up Aching Rivers, I Sing The Body Electric, A Woman Waits For Me, Spontaneous Me, One Hour To Madness And Joy, Ages And Ages Returning At Intervals, I Am He That Aches With Love, Native Moments, Once I Pass'd Through A Populous City,* and *As Adam Early In The Morning*. In poems of this group, Whitman continues his exaltation and glorification of the human body and the senses with an even greater frankness than he had shown in *Song Of Myself*. In the poem, *From Pent-Up Aching Rivers*, for instance, he boldly says that he would sing the song of the phallus and the song of procreation. He speaks of

> The welcome nearness, the sight of the perfect body,
> The swimmer swimming naked in the bath, or motionless
> on his back lying and floating.
> The female form approaching, I pensive, love-flesh
> tremulous aching, ...
> The mystic deliria, the madness amorous, the utter
> abandonment,

and, addressing the female form, he goes on to say :

> O you and I ! what is it to us what the rest do or think ?
> What is all else to us ? only that we enjoy each other
> and exhaust each other if it must be so......

That is not all. He goes on to speak of the long-sustained kiss upon the mouth or bosom, the close pressure that makes him or any man drunk, fainting with excess, the bed-fellow's embrace in the night, and so on. In the poem in which he sings "the body electric", he says that the body of the male is perfect and that the body of the female is perfect, and that the human body defies description. Speaking of the female form, he says :

> This is the female form,
> A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot,
> It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction,......

In the same poem, he gives us some more lines in praise of the human body :

> If any thing is sacred the human body is sacred,
> And the glory and sweet of a man is the token of manhood untainted,
> And in man or woman a clean, strong, firm-fibred body, is more beautiful than the most beautiful face.

In the poem called *Ages And Ages Returning At Intervals*, Whitman speaks of himself thus :

> Lusty, phallic, with the potent original loins, perfectly sweet,
> I, chanter of Adamic songs,...
> Bathing myself, bathing my songs in Sex,
> Offspring of my loins.

In another poem in this group he says : "I am he that aches with amorous love."

This is what a critic says about these poems : "In *Song Of Myself*, the poet achieves intense self-awareness only through sexual awakening (Section 28). In "Children of Adam", the consciousness projects outward from the self to embrace a partner. Announcing his intention to sing the song of the phallus and procreation, the poet celebrates 'the mystic deliria, the madness amorous, the utter abandonment'. No longer is the poet alone ; he becomes Adam with his Eve :

> I draw you close to me you woman,
> I cannot let you go, I would do you good,
> I am for you, and you are for me, not only for our own sake, but for others' sakes,
> Envelop'd in you sleep greater heroes and bards,
> They refuse to awake at the touch of any man but me
> (*A Woman Waits For Me*)

The sexual consciousness is not only extended to another individual, but the centre of feeling is shifted to the procreational aspects of the experience. No longer driven backward on itself, the sexual identity extends outward to women, and on beyond into the future :

> I shall look for loving crops from the birth, life, death, immortality, I plant so lovingly now[1].

In "Calamus", the poet's sexual consciousness extends beyond the female to celebrate manly attachment, types of athletic love, and the need of comrades......In one poem[2], Whitman juxtaposed the two kinds of love, man-woman, and man-man, in order to dramatise the difference."

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[1] Again in the last line of the poem, *A Woman Waits For Me.*

[2] The title of that poem is *Fast-Anchor'd Eternal O Love.*

7

The ' Calamus" Poems

The group of forty-five poems called "Calamus", which appeared in 1860, are regarded as Whitman's homosexual love-poems. They were written on the theme of the love of comrades, or male friendship, or what Whitman himself called "manly attachment". "Calamus" is the name of a plant. It is a kind of very large and aromatic grass, or rush, growing about water-ponds in the valleys of the northern and middle States of America. This grass is about three feet high. Whitman used the name of this grass as a symbol of "adhesiveness" or comradeship. In contrast with the common grass that grows wherever the land and the water is, the calamus plant grows

> In paths untrodden,
> In the growth by margins of pond-water,
> Escaped from the life that exhibits itself......
>
> (*In Paths Untrodden*)[1]

As the poet elaborates the image in such poems as *Scented Herbage Of My Breast* and *These I Singing In Spring*, he exploits all the possibilities for symbolism that the strongly individualistic plant offers :

> Indeed O death, I think now these leaves mean precisely
> the same as you mean.
>
> (*Scented Herbage Of My Breast*)
>
> And this, O this shall henceforth be the token of
> comrades, this calamus-root shall.
>
> (*These I Singing in Spring*)

Calamus plant has long, tapering leaves, and a cylindrical flower, and therefore serves also as a phallic symbol. Whitman points out the ambiguity of the image in the poem *Scented Herbage Of My Breast*, when he says :

> Emblematic and capricious blades I leave you, now you
> serve me not,
> I will say what I have to say by itself......

Calamus has a religious symbolism also. The pink root of the calamus plant (also called Sweet Flag) is a token passed around among the members of an esoteric cult. The exchange of the token binds the comrades in an unspoken compact so exclusive between two persons and held in such shyness and secrecy that it is not the worshipping of a divine power through erotic ecstasy (as in "Children Of Adam"), but simply eroticism for its own sake.

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[1] This is the very first of the "Calamus" group of poems.

Apart from the theme, what is remarkable in the Calamus poems is their sustained lyricism. They vibrate with deep personal emotion, and some of them rank very high among the great love-poems in world literature, though the love is of the homosexual kind. There is an erotomaniac quality in these poems because now and then we get the impression that, as Whitman himself says, he is not capable of remaining alone in one place ; he must go on to new experiences and new sensations. If Whitman in his own life did not establish a permanent love connection, he was prevented by his own nature ; it would not have suited him. As a result, the constant flitting and wandering of his emotion is all-pervading in his lyricism.

The more important of the Calamus poems are :

Scented Herbage Of My Breast, *Whoever You are Holding Me now in Hand*, *These I Singing in Spring*, *Are You the New Person Drawn toward Me* ?, *City of Orgies*, *I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing*, *To a Stranger*, *I Hear It was Charged against Me*, *A Glimpse*, *Earth*, *My Likeness*, *What Think You I Take My Pen in Hand*, *Sometimes With One I Love*, *Sometimes With One I Love*, and *To a Western Boy*.

The following comment on the Calamus poems is noteworthy : "The blending of emotions and moods, of heedless confession and poetic interpretation, is extraordinary in this section of *Leaves of Grass*. It stretches from requited to unrequited love, from confidence and arrogance to insecurity and shame, from bold shout and frank courtship to a wondering desperate confession that love is a dangerous, inconstant passion which will not bring happiness, for example, *Are You the New Person Drawn toward Me* ?

Thus, in spite of the conflicting emotions, it is as tenderly expressed as any collection of love poetry in world literature. But we cannot deny that at times its diversity includes completely irreconcilable contradictions. Side by side with the bashful confessions of love and devotion, along with the poetically inspired expression of ideal friendship and comradeship, are poems suddenly and completely eroto-maniac in character, in which the poet's insatiable longing for new faces, new experiences, makes us involuntarily doubt the sincerity and honesty of his experiences."

8

Walt Whitman : The Poet of Democracy

More than anything else, Whitman was the singer and prophet of American democracy. In his opinion, evil flowed from tyranny or superstition rather than from human nature. The comparatively free environment in which the American lived seemed to him to be well-suited to the growth of a noble race of people. He decided to sing not of kings or nobles but of the "divine average" of American citizenship, engaged in the homely yet wonderful tasks of every day :

In the labor of engines and trades, and the labor of fields,
I find the developments,
And find the eternal meanings......

Accordingly, his poetry is replete with unforgettable pictures of American people and American scenes. "The blacksmith, the Negro teamster, the butcher, the farmer returning from the fields, the mother sewing, the soldier keeping watch on the battlefield, the prostitute, the pioneer, and hundreds of others—all move in a motley, yet somehow intensely living, throng across his pages. We hear the hum and clatter of house-building, shingle-dressing, ship-joining, ferrying, mining, iron-smelting, stone-cutting, and cotton-loading".

Whitman identified America with the concept of freedom, and in effect wrote one continuous song about democracy. "I shall" he said in "Democratic Vistas" (1871), "use the words America and democracy as convertible terms." He expressed the inner spirit of America and its freedom as nobody had ever done before or did afterwards. He was the poet of the American democracy. He had no theme other than democracy in all its human applications and universal implications. He did, indeed, identify democracy with poetry and art, believing them to be but different expressions of the unhampered life of a free people. Democracy, he tells us in *Specimen Days* (1882), most of all affiliates with the open air, is sunny and hardy and sane only with Nature—just as much as art is. American democracy, in its numerous manifestations, in factories, work-shops, stores, offices, through streets and cities and all their sophisticated life, must be vitalised by regular contact with outdoor light and air, farm-scenes, animals, fields, trees, birds, because otherwise it will certainly dwindle and pale.

Whitman sang about his countrymen in the totality of their lives and doings. Unlike the poets of the past, who wrote about the romantic or the heroic, Whitman celebrated the common-place and the earthy. To him the whole kosmos was beautiful and made of the stuff of poetry. So he sang about the life of every-day Americans, their fields and their follies, their leaders and their lusts, their politics and their politeness, their lunatics and their "literates":

> I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
> Those of Mechanics...,
> The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or
>   beam.
> The mason singing...,
> The boatman singing...,the deck-hand singing...

He made it a habit to itemise every detail, place and name of American life :

> Land of coal and iron ! land of gold ! land of cotton, sugar,
>   rice !
> Land of wheat, beef, pork ! land of wool and hemp ! land
>   of apple and the grape !
> Land of the pastoral lambs... !
> Land of the herd, the garden... !
> Land of the eastern Chesapeake !
> Land of the Delaware !
> Land of Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan... !

Whitman was almost overwhelmed by the richness of the American scene. Thinking of it he could not control the rush of his words. "Have you learned the physiology, phrenology, politics, geography, pride, freedom, friendship of the land ?" His passion for enumerating details, nouns, names, places, big words and little words, made Emerson ask whether Whitman was writing poetry or "an auction inventory of a warehouse."

Two of the most famous lines in *Song of Myself* (Section 5) read as follows :

> And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and
>   the women my sisters and lovers,
> And that a kelson of the creation is love...

In Section 7 of *Song of Myself*, the poet calls himself "the mate and companion 'of people' whom he regards just as "immortal and fathomless" as himself. The poet expresses his interest in all kinds of people—the proud man, the sweet-heart, the old maid, the mother, and the mother of mothers.

In Section 23, the poet emphasises the importance of the word *En-Masse* meaning the common people.

In Section 24, he gives a classic expression to his love of democracy in such lines as the following ·

> (1) Whoever degrades another degrades me
> (2) I speak the pass-word primeval,
>   I give the sign of democracy,
>   By God ! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their
>   counterpart of on the same terms.

In the poem *I Hear America Singing*, the poet expresses his acceptance of all kinds of people in America, with their varied occupations and the songs they sing at their work. He speaks of the carpenter, the mason, the boatman, the shoe-maker, the wood-cutter, etc. In the poems called *I Hear It Was Charged Against Me*, he celebrates the institution of "the dear love of comrades" which also shows his sense of equality or democracy. In the poem *One's-Self I Sing*, he utters "the word democratic, the word En-Masse." The poem concludes with the line : "The Modern Man I Sing."

In *Song of the Open Road*, he speaks of the Negro with his woolly head, the felon, the diseased, the illiterate person, the beggar, the drunkard, the mechanic, the escaped youth, the fop, etc. (Section 2). In Section 12 of the same poem, he speaks of sailors of many a ship, walkers of many a mile of land, observers of cities, solitary toilers, dancers at wedding dances, tender helpers of children, soldiers of revolts, and journeyers of all kinds. Such catalogues show the writer's all-embracing humanity.

Whitman was more democratic than Emerson. He talks about "the love of comrades", and seems to think that this by itself will make America a true democracy. He likes to hobnob with the common people, "to go freely with powerful, uneducated persons." He was extremely affectionate, all too ready to hook his arm around another man's waist (although this attitude has only served to strengthen the charge of homosexuality against him). There can be no doubt about the sincerity of his affection for all members of the human race.

Through Whitman poetry breathes the spirit of charity and tenderness. This charity is almost Christ-like. The following lines from *Song of Myself* may be taken as an example :

> The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her
> tipsy and pimpled neck.
> The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer
> and wink to each other.
> Miserable ! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you.

Some consider Whitman's charity to be a mere pose. No doubt he liked to think of himself as a new Messiah, but it would be wrong to look upon him as a poseur.

Whitman advocates brotherly love and complete equality. This is his great point, and his catalogues show this point best in Section 15 of *Song of Myself* where he gives us a catalogue containing pictures of the carpenter, the pilot, the farmer, the lunatic, the printer the wagon-driver the overseer, etc. The very versification of the lines in this Section represents the author's concept of a democratic society. The lines march shoulder to shoulder, without any subordination, one to another. They march with a sense at once of individual self-containment, and of being a part of a large company. There are many other catalogues and they all illustrate perfectly in their form the thought of the following lines by Whitman :

> One's self I sing, a simple separate Person,
> Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

There is very little of the Christian doctrine in Whitman's democratic creed. Whitman, like Emerson, rejected Original Sin, the atonement, the special authority of the Christian scriptures. Like Emerson, again, he did not recognise distinctions : between natural and regenerate, bad and good, wrong and right, low and high, inferior and superior. He treats everybody on the same footing. No doubt there is such a thing as Christian equality, but the Christian doctrine recognises also a scale of values : there are thrones and dominions, principalities and powers. There is inclusion and exclusion. Excellence cannot exist in a distinctionless world. Whitman's world is man-centred. Nobody has carried the apotheosis or glorification of man farther than Whitman.

In his *Song of the Exposition*, Whitman wrote not only his own *credo*, but uttered the manifesto of the new generation—especially in these lines :

> Come, Muse, migrate from Greece and Ionia,
> Cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts,
> That matter of Troy and Achilles' wrath, and Aeneas', Odysseus' wanderings,
> Placard "Removed" and "To Let" on the rocks of your snowy Parnassus,...
> For know a better, fresher, busier sphere, a wide, untried domain awaits, demands you.

The earth wanted a prophet of democracy, and offered him the grass as a symbol. He accepted the symbol and made it the banner of a crusade for the establishment of a new order of society in which all should be equal and all great. He does not however, abrogate his own superiority as seer and spokesman. The equality is potential, not actual. To reduce all people at once to a condition of equality would mean degradation for the more advanced. Democracy requires only that each individual be left free to grow : his equality with other individuals consists in his freedom, not in any identity of qualities. Whitman acknowledges that eventually the 'little plentiful manikins skipping around in collars and tailed coats"[1] may reach his level, but at present he dismisses them contemptuously as "positively not worms or fleas."[2]

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1 & 2 : Section 42 of *Song of Myself*.

9

Walt Whitman's Optimism

Whitman's optimism was even more buoyant than Emerson's. Healthy, satisfied, overflowing with life as he was, he found in the universe a scheme of hormonious and benevolent order :

In Section 50 of *Song of Myself* he writes :

> Do you see O my brothers and sisters ?
> It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is Happiness.

He has a healthy attitude towards death :

> Has any one supposed it lucky to be born ?
> I hasten to inform him or her, it is just as lucky to die...

He is not afraid of death :

> And as to you Death, and you bitter hug of mortality it is idle to try to alarm me.

(*Song of Myself, Section 49*).

About old age and death he writes :

> Old age superbly rising ! O welcome, ineffable grace of dying days !
> Every condition promulges not only itself, it promulges what grows after and out of itself,
> And the dark thrush promulges as much as any.

These lines are vaguely reminiscent of the central thought of Browning's *Rabbi Ben Ezra.*

Whitman brings encouragement and hope to even the humblest worker : "And there is no trade or employment but the young man following it may become a hero."

But his attitude was not merely one of a tranquil approval of life. He was passionately in love with life, and life thrilled him with the ecstasy of a lover. The clean atmosphere was sweeter to him than any perfume, while the ocean was to him a wild yet affectionate playmate. He sang of the sheer joy of existence with an abandon that no American poet had yet displayed. He was pleased with life in all its phases. Common-place things had a certain greatness in his eyes. A leaf of grass, the galaxy of stars, and the human body were all marvellous and miraculous to him. He sang of the wonders of the human body, and especially of the wonder and mystery of sex. In *I Sing the Body Electric* (1856), he writes :

If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred......
And in man or woman, a clean, strong, firm-fibred
body is beautiful as the most beautiful face.

He celebrated the human body with a concreteness and a frankness which shocked his readers many of whom began to think him obscene.

Nor was his optimism weakened by the discoveries of science which, with its belief in a universe of impersonal forces, depresses many modern thinkers. Like Emerson, he welcomed science, enjoyed the sense of living in the midst of "vital laws", the greatest of which according to him was the Law of Evolution. Evolution for him meant progress and it represented in his eyes the slow unfolding of cosmic purposes. He was a lover of life, a poet of the body and the soul, a believer in immortality, and a believer in a purposeful evolution. He found good in all things :

In the satisfaction and aplomb of animals,
In the annual return of the seasons,
In the hilarity of youth,
In the strength and flush of manhood,
In the grandeur and exquisiteness of old age,
In the superb vistas of death.

We think of Whitman as the great optimistic affirmer of democratic hope, of new-world expansiveness and optimism and progress, with his eyes glancing all over the enormous American continent, making tremendous play with the picturesque place-names, projecting himself all over the United States in a wide gesture of embracing, of affirming, of life, of optimism, and of general 'O-kayness'.

Walt Whitman's experience of American life was very wide. Having worked as an office boy for a lawyer and then for a doctor, as a country school-teacher, as a printer, as a journalist as a reformer, as a theatre-goer, he had come into contact with all classes of Americans. He was more broadly national in experience and sympathies than Cooper, Melville, Emerson, and Lowell. To his varied experience, he had added wide reading.

Walt Whitman's general attitude may be described as an acceptance of a benevolent and harmonious universe, a firm opposition to old customs, a faith in the natural man rather than in institutions, and a strong expectation of a larger and richer life for the common people. Although these attitudes had become common in America, they had not yet received an adequate expression in literature. Accordingly it became Whitman's principal desire to express this American body of ideas, and he wished to do so through the portrayal of his own strongly American personality. He tells us that at the age of 31-33, he had "a feeling or ambition to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit and facts of its immediate days, and of current America..........."

Whitman succeeds in conveying to the reader a clear idea of America's spaciousness and America's varied multitudinous life. While rejoicing in a free, materialistic America, he believed that the best fruit of democracy would be the maximum development of the individual. He wanted freedom to develop into "rich luxuriant, and varied personalism." He advocated what may be called democratic brotherhood. Even on the brink of the Civil War, in the midst of violent hatreds, he wrote :

> Come, I will make the continent indissoluble......
> With the love of comrades,
> With the life-long love of comrades.

And at the close of the war, he could still write ;

> Be not disheartened—Affection shall solve the problems
> of freedom yet :
>
> Those who love each other shall become invincible......

He advocated an attitude of mind which promoted the sense of wonder, the hearty acceptance of the world-scheme, a zest for life, a freedom from conventions, and a glorification of the life of the "divine average". And he believed that this could be achieved through the efforts of American poets who could stir and inspire the American nation with songs suited to a new, democratic nation. Such is the message of that vigorous chant of Americanism : *By Blue Ontario 'Shore.*

Whitman was not only a poet, but a prophet also. He made himself uniquely the poet of American democracy. ' And since that democracy was essentially a product of romanticism, Whitman came to represent, in this as in other things, the peak of the romantic movement in America".

ɩt was not only in the field of "form" that Whitman was a poetic emancipator. He led the way toward a wider aspect of democracy. He took his readers out of fusty, lamp-lit libraries into the coarse sun-light, and the buoyant air. He was, as Burroughs wrote, pre-eminently the poet of vista. His work had the power "to open doors and windows, to let down bars rather than to put them up, to dissolve forms, to escape narrow boundaries, to plant the reader on a hill rather than in a corner."

He firmly believed in life—in its physical as well as its spiritual manifestations. He tried to grasp existence as a whole, not rejecting the things that had seemed to others to be trivial or tawdry. He believed in the cosmic and the commonplace. He identified himself with elemental, primitive things. He transmuted material which had hitherto been regarded as too unpoetic for poetry. His *Song of Myself* is a magnificent example. Here his "barbaric yawp" is softened, time and again, to express a lyric ecstasy and wonder :

> I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work
> of the stars,
> And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand,
> and the egg of the wren,

……………………………………………………………

And the cow crunching with depress'd head surpasses
any statue,
And a mouse is miracle enough to stager sextillions of
infidels !

(*Section 31*)

It is this large naturalism, this affection for all that is homely and of the soil, that sets Whitman apart from his fellow craftsmen as the first distinctively American poet. This blend of familiarity and grandeur, this racy but religious mysticism animates all his work. It swings with tremendous vigour through *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*. It beats sonorously through *Drum-Taps*. It whispers immortality through that magnificent threnody *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd*. It quicken.. the *Song of the Open Road* with what Tennyson called "the glory of going on". It lifts with a biblical solemnity *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*.

It is the broad and restless affirmation which quickens everything he wrote. It is the spirit which pervades the poem addressed to a common prostitute : "Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you." It is the quick recognition of the commonplace, the glorification of the unnoticed in a pismire and a grain of sand.

This spirit is gross and sensual, and at the same time tender and mystical ; it calls for "life coarse and rank", yet it lifts appetite beyond life and death ; it is as explosive as a teamster's oath and as grave as the Psalms which influenced it. Its ecstasy, even its exhibitionism, though flushed with a raw and rowdy exuberance, is filled with a "calm, mortis'd granite." It is, possibly, a too all-embracing love which intensifies whatever it touches, an over-vigorous optimism compared to which even Browning seems anaemic. But its indiscriminate acceptance is the very core of its faith, enclosing good and evil, beauty and ugliness, in the mystic's circle of complete affirmation.

For him no aspect of life was trivial. Every common, superficial cover was a cavern of rich and inexhaustible depths. The road-side running blackberry was "fit to adorn the parlors of heaven." Nothing was mean, nothing was rejected. Whitman had read Blake, Dante, Shakespeare, Shelley. Besides knowing his Bible, he was acquainted with the sacred books of the East and their re-expression in Emerson. His aim was inclusive, for though he celebrated the person in all his separateness, he added the word "democratic", the word *En-Masse*. All was included in "the procreant urge of the world." Opposites merge into one ; the unseen is proved by the seen ; all goes onward and outward, nothing collapses. Light and dark, good and evil, body and soul, do not merely emphasise but complete each other. According to him, an "adhesive" love, the love of comrades, was the basis on which a broader democracy would be built. His all-inclusive love springs not only from his own "pathological eccentricities", but from an undefined Pantheism. His wholeheartedness, his large yea-saying, coming at a time of cautious scepticism, hesitancy, and insecurity, is Whitman's gift not only to his period but to posterity.

His *Song of the Open Road* is a striking example of his optimistic faith in progress and advancement, not only of a personal but general, almost universal, nature. At the outset he declares :

> Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
> Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
> Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
> Strong and content I travel the open road.
> (*Lines 4—7*)

And he closes the poem on a note of hope and faith :

> Will you give me yourself ? Will you come travel with me ?
> Shall we stick by each other as long as we live ?

Even the two great elegies *Out of the Cradle* and *When the Lilacs in the Door-Yard Bloom'd* end on a note of reconciliation and acceptance.

10

Walt Whitmans' Egotism

An egotist is a person who prepetually talks about himself, using the first-person singular. The egotist is in love with himself and considers himself so important as never to lose sight of himself. In a sense, Whitman is a thorough egotist as he is continually harping upon the theme of himself. This is nowhere more pronounced than in *Song of Myself* the opening lines of which are almost aggressively egotistical :

> I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
> And what I assume you shall assume...

Throughout *Song of Myself* the poet keeps returning to himself, his own personality, his own likings and predilections, his all-embracing humanity, his equalitarianism, and his own body and his own soul. In Section 3, for instance, he says :

> Clear and sweet is my Soul, and clear and sweet is all
> that is not my soul.

He goes on to say in the same Section : "Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean." It is true that in both these lines he speaks about other souls and other men, besides himself ; but the emphasis is upon himself. "I go, bathe, and admire myself." he says. In Section 2, he invites the reader to "Stop this day and night with me, and you shall possess the origin of all poems." In Section 16, he declares that he is "of old and young, of the foolish as much as of the wise." In Section 20, he says : "I wear my hat as I please, in doors or out", and goes on to ask : "Why should I pray? Why should I venerate and ceremonious?" He emphasises his egotism in the same Section by observing : "I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones" and "In all people I see myself—And I know I am solid and sound ; I know I am deathless ; I exist as I am—that is enough." In Section 21, he defines himself as the poet of the Body and as the poet of the Soul, adding : "I am the poet of the woman the same as the man." In Section 22, he tel ls us that he is not the poet of goodness only : "I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also."

Section 24 is truly a song of Whitman himself. This is perhaps the most egotistical Section in the poem. He describes himself thus :

> Walt Whitman am I, a Kosmos, of mighty Manhattan
> the son,

> Turbulent, fleshy and sensual, eating, drinking, and
> breeding ;
> No sentimentalist—no stander above men and women,
> or apart from them ;
> No more modest than immodest.

He shows his democratic faith by saying: "Whoever degrades another degrades me." He calls himself the spokesman of many voices—voices of slaves, voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons voices of the diseased and despairing, of thieves and dwarfs, voices of sex and lust, voices indecent. Copulation is no more rank to him than death is. He expresses his faith in the flesh and the appetites, and pays himself in the following tribute :

> Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever
> I touch or am touch'd from ;
> The scent of these arm-pits, aroma finer than prayer ;
> This head more than churches,bibles, and all the creeds.

If he worships one thing more than another, it is "the spread of my own body, or any part of it." One of the most egotistical lines occurs in this very Section when he says :

> I dote on myself—there is that lot of me, and all so
> luscious.

In Section 25, he regards himself as a store-house : "Walt, you contain enough—Why don't you let it out, then ?" In Section 27, he reveals his nature by saying :

> Mine is no callous shell ;
> I have instant conductors all over me, whether I pass or
> stop :
> They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through
> me.

In Section 42, he startles us by saying :

> I know perfectly well my own egotism ;
> I know my omnivorous lines, and must not write any
> less ;
> And would fetch you, whoever you are, flush with myself ;

In Section 51, he pays himself another compliment :

> Do I contradict myself ?
> Very well, then, I contradict myself ;
> (I am large—I contain multitudes.)

In Section 52, he tells us that he is not a bit tamed, and that he is untranslatable. "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world", he says thus giving an approximately correct, though not self-complimentary, description of his verse.

In *The Sleepers*, his egotism is equally marked. Throughout the poem he is talking about his own dream-like experiences. The same is roughly true of *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* and of *Song of the Open Road*. In a short poem called *Me Imperturbe*, he gives an analysis of himself. In poems like *Native Moments* and *Once I Pass'd through a Populous City*, he describes his personal experiences.

In short, Whitman glories almost exclusively in the first-person singular. "There can be no third-person in his world; and the second-person must necessarily be at the loving mercy of the first." He said of *Leaves of Grass* that it was an attempt "to put a Person, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, in America) freely, fully, and truly, on record."

All experience, all thought, all belief, all appearance in Whitman's poetry are referred back to the ego :

> And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my
> own,
> And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my
> own,
> And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and
> the women my sisters and lovers,
> And that a kelson of the creation is love,
> And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
> And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
> And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder,
> mullein and poke-weed.

In this passage taken from the fifth section of *Song of Myself* the world is described as it exists apart from the poet; yet he can name and collocate its potentially infinite aspects only so that he may discover and define his relationship to it. His objectivity is that of an impressionist, and so finally an aspect of his subjectivity. He may aspire to achieve some sort of identity with his world; yet his power of naming, describing, and collocating is such that a reader cannot but be overwhelmingly, even uncritically, aware of the single ego, the self, which generates it. The power is that of a lover who rather drives himself, than is drawn, to love the world. A father Adam who bids men listen to him so that they might hear their proper names and so come alive—this is how Whitman images himself. He does not fear his power, but knows that others may. And he must quiet their apprehensions. One short poem says it all :

> As Adam early in the morning,
> Walking forth from the bower refresh'd with sleep,
> Behold me where I pass, hear my voice, approach,
> Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body as
> I pass,
> Be not afraid of my body.

In his poetry, the ego is made not only to assert but to preserve itself. The ego asserts itself Adamically, by naming. The poet is a father giving his name to all he sees, hears and feels. His office is to make everything part of the community of man; the sense of communiy is revealed as he discovers, and then yields to, his infinite sense of himself. He puts things together as they never have been before; they are related only by the force of the poetic ego operative on them. There is little or no dramatic effect in the poems, even those with huge casts of character; for the items which are named in them do not interact, are not conceived as modifying and qualifying one another, so as to make for dramatic tension. They are referred back to their creator, who does with them as his sensibility wills.

The great catalogues are inevitably the principal expressive form for one who would define himself as "Kosmos".

We should not, however, take a narrow view of the use of "I" in Whitman's poetry. While it is true that the "I" in his poems refers to Walt Whitman, there is a universal aspect of "I" also. This universal aspect is seen in two ways

Firstly, Whitman attempts an imaginative and sympathetic identification of himself with every other individual self. This tendency is seen in the very opening Section when he says ; "For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you." This is also seen in the various catalogues of persons and things that are found interspersed in *Song of Myself.* In *The Sleepers*, he identifies himself with all kinds of people :

> I am the actor, the actress, the voter, the politician,
> The emigrant and the exile, the criminal that stood in the box,
> He who has been famous and he who shall be famous after to-day,
> The stammerer, the well-form'd person, the wasted or feeble person.

Secondly, the universal aspect of "I" is to be found in Whitman's attempt at a mystical union with God, the Absolute Self.

The first-person pronoun which occurs most frequently in Whitman's poetry is poet himself, but the poet seems to address his own soul as a being separate from himself. Whitman seems to feel that he is one thing and his soul another thing and that Walt Whitman, a person in time, has a special relation to, and a special interest in an individual also named Walt Whitman who lives beyond time and space.

The "I" in *Leaves of Grass* may mean any one of several existences in time or in eternity. In the first place, *Leaves of Grass* is obviously autobiographical in the customary sense. In the second place, it is possible that Whitman extended the range of his actual experiences and memories and identified himself with a number of imagined activities. In this shadowy region where fact and fancy mingle with each other the riddle of Whitman's sexual history is hidden. No one has more beautifully described the ecstasy of perfect sexual union than has Whitman, but how much of it is remembered and how much is imagined biographers cannot tell. Thirdly, the "I" of the poem may symbolise the great American, a figure that celebrates the heroism of those who fought the Civil War but who shrouds the ugly side of American democracy of the time. This figure toils westward with the pioneers, fights on board the *Bonhomme Richard*, wanders southward with slave and planter, is convict and judge, prostitute and president, anybody and nobody. This "I" is the American Everyman.

Whitman's equalitarianism was a fierce affirmation accompanying awareness of an opposing spirit in America. He looked at America as "pride, competition, segregation, vicious wilfulness and licence beyond example." In this ardent equalitarianism he found his subject central himself : "I celebrate myself, and sing myself[1]...I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven[2] And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves[3]... The smallest sprout shows there is really no death[4]." Thus the central theme in *Leaves of Grass* is a symbolic identification of regeneration in nature with the deathless self. In developing this theme, Whitman seems completely unaffected by that unresolved philosophical conflict between the individual and the collective that has troubled so many nineteenth and twentieth century thinkers. "One's-Self I Sing", he wrote, : "a simple separate person. Yet utter the world Democratic, the word *En-Masse*." As "mate and companion of people[5]", he hails all races and continents, all cities and countries, and the workmen of all occupations.

11

Walt Whitman : The Mystic

Walt Whitman's poetry is basically transcendentalist. The principal influence on him is that of Emerson. "I was simmering, simmering, simmering ; Emerson brought me to a boil," Whitman tells us. His thought is unsystematic and intuitive, like that of Emerson. It is the thought not of a logician but of a mystic :

> Wisdom is of the Soul, is not susceptible to proof, is its own
>   proof.
> Applies to all stages and objects and qualities, and is
>   content,
> Is the certainty of the reality and immortality of things,
>   and the excellence of things ;
> Something there is in the float of the sight of things
>   that provokes it out of the soul.

A strong note of mysticism runs through the bulk of Whitman's poetry. *Song of Myself* has been regarded as a prolonged expression of an experience that is essentially mystical. It is believed that Whitman was greatly influenced not only by Emerson but by oriental mysticism. While that is true there is a big difference between Whitman's mysticism and the mysticism of the orient. Briefly speaking, a mystic is a person who believes in the existence of the soul, in the existence of God or the Divine Spirit, in the immortality of the human soul, and in the capacity of a human being to establish an intercourse or communication between his spirit and the Divine Spirit. Whitman is truly a mystic in these respects. But while the oriental mystic believes that an intercourse between his spirit and the Divine Spirit is possible only through the mortification or the conquest of the senses and the physical appetites, Whitman believes that the spiritual experience is possible and even desirable without sacrificing the senses in the least. Whitman is a mystic while being at the same time a celebrant of sex and the senses.

This strange blending of fusion of spiritualism and sensualism is evident throughout *Song of Myself* and other poems of the earlier period of Whitman's life, though it is true that in Whitman's latter poetry mysticism comes to the fore and sensualism is almost discarded.

In Section 5 of *Song of Myself*, we find Whitman describing a mystical frame of mind. He describes what may be called the marriage of the body and the soul. Addressing his soul he says :

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart.
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.

This is mystical experience but the sexual connotations of these lines are obvious. Whitman believes that the senses are to play a vital role in the desired union of the body and the soul. "Whereas normally the mystical state is achieved only through a mortification of, or escape from the senses the poet of *Song of Myself* asserts that it is *through* the transfigured senses that he reaches mystical consciousness. It is only through the intimate fusion of the physical and spiritual, the ennobling of the physical through the spiritual, that one can come to know transcendent reality." In the same Section (5), we have a mystic's awakening to a consciousness of divine reality when the poet says :

And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own.

In Section 6, the grass is regarded as "the handkerchief of the Lord/A scented gift and remembrancer, designedly dropt" which means that the poet mystically looks upon the grass as a key to ultimate reality. In Section 11, a mystical experience is symbolically conveyed through a piece of sensuous description. The twenty-eight naked young men bathing in the sea are the twenty-eight imperfections of a human being, while the handsome and richly-dressed lady whose unseen hand passes over the bodies of the young men is the soul surveying those imperfections.

The importance of the body and the senses is, indeed, emphasised throughout *Song of Myself*. In Section 21, for instance, the writer calls himself "the poet of the Body" and "the poet of the soul", which means that the poet equates the body with the soul. In Section 24, the poet not only becomes the spokesman of "forbidden voices—voice of sexes and lusts, voices indecent", but declares : "I believe in the flesh and the appetites", and "If I worship one thing more than another, it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it." In the same Section, he goes on to express his love of his own body which he regards as "luscious". In Section 28, he describes the strange sensations that he experiences when his body is touched by another. No oriental mystic would ever give expression to such feelings about the human body, the human sense, and the human appetites. This blending of mysticism and sensualism in Whitman is something unique. The poet who celebrates the sex and the senses becomes a true mystic when he writes (in Section 31 of *Song of Myself*) :

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,

> And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand,
> and the egg of the wren,...

He reiterates his belief in the equality of the body and the soul in Section 48 :

> I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
> And I have said that the body is not more than the soul ;

In a poem called *I Sing the Body Electric*, this mystic sings of the glory of the human body and the human senses : "If any thing is sacred, the human body is sacred." He celebrates every organ of the body of man and of the body of woman :

> All attitudes, all the shapeliness, all the belongings of my
> or your body, or of any one's body, male or female,...
> The womb, the teats, nipples, breast-milk, tears, laughter,...

From 1867 onwards, he felt that he must bridge the gap between the transient life of the body and the permanent life of the soul. New and more religious poems must be written to accomplish this purpose. One of the first of these poems was *Passage to India*, in which he has a vision of the human race regenerated in the union of the spiritual wisdom of the east with the enlightened materialism of the west, and of the soul made free at last through this regeneration for continued development and eventual union with God. The poem soars to inspiring heights. It remains the noblest and only adequate expression of his religious aspiration.

In such poems the theme of spirituality or mysticism acquires a central importance. In poems like *Prayer of Columbus*, *Passage to India*, and *Whispers of Heavenly Death*, mysticism is dominant, to the almost entire exclusion of sensualism. In the first-named poem, Columbus is depicted in a religious and mystical frame of mind. Indeed, *Prayer of Columbus* is a soliloquy of the mystical and religious soul. In *Passage to India*, the soul is objectified and depicted as master of orbs, mate of time, smiler at death. God is described as "Light of light, shedding forth universes, thou center of them." The true solemnity of a mystical visionary is reflected in the following lines :

> Swiftly I shrivel at the thought of God,
> At Nature and its wonders, Time and Space and Death,
> But that I, turning, call to thee O soul, thou actual Me,
> And lo, thou gently masterest the orbs,
> Thou matest Time, smilest content at Death,
> And fillest, swellest full the vastnesses of Space.

Passage to India celebrates three great material achievements of modern times but has a spiritual message to convey.

Whitman's mysticism is also seen in *The Sleepers*. In this poem, night is regarded as a symbol of the innate spirituality of all things. Night results in a spiritual peace unknown to day. Night becomes a miniature (and daily) death accomplishing on a small scale and temporarily what death does on a large scale and permanently. The poet here acquires an insight into the "myth of heaven" ;

Peace is always beautiful,
The myth of heaven indicates peace and night
……………………………………………………
The myth of heaven indicates the soul,

A knowledge of the "myth of heaven" leads to the declaration that the "universe is duly in order, everything is in its place." (II, 210).

A "mystic without a creed." Whitman sees God expressing Himself everywhere—in cities as well as in wild nature. The body is the manifestation of the spirit, which is liberated by death for a higher life.

12

Walt Whitman's Treatment of Love and Sex

Whitman is a great love-poet because love is necessary to his understanding of the universe as it must be for anyone who tries to see into the heart of creation. He may have missed it in its more familiar manifestations, as his biography suggests. But men who miss it are likely to be men with a special sense of its unique price. Whitman explores the mysteries of love on many levels :

> Who goes there ? hankering, gross, mystical, nude ?
>
> (Section 20 of *Song of Myself*)

In *Song of Myself* speaks the Whitman whom most readers know, the semi-barbarous, semi-angelic singer of sexual delight. No one has ever been more frank than he concerning this delight. And no one has ever been more savage in insisting that it be given expression in its own terms. In certain sections of *Song of Myself* he explores the terrors and inversions of sex as well as its sunny places. No reality of love was alien to his interest. In Section 2, for instance, he speaks merely of "a few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms." In Section 3, he dwells on "the procreant urge of the world' and the importance of sex : "Out of the dimness opposite equals advance—always substance and increase, always sex." In Section 3, he also speaks of a woman spending a night with him :

> I am satisfied—I see, dance, laugh, sing :
> As the hugging and loving Bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night, and withdraws at the peep of the day, with stealthy tread...

(These lines are believed to have a mystical significance). In Section 5, he speaks of the intimacy of his soul with himself in words that have obvious sexual implications. In Section 11, he describes the desire of a lone-some lady for the twenty-eight young men who are bathing naked in the sea :

> Which of the young men does she like the best ?
> Ah, the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.

In Section 15, he describes a prostitute being jeered at by a crowd of men : "The crowd laugh at her blackgaurd oaths, the men jeer and wink to each other." In Section 19, he becomes almost tender :

> This is the press of a bashful hand—this is the float and odor of hair ;
> This the touch of my lips to yours—this the murmur of yearning.

In Section 21, he declares the equality of man and woman. In Section 24, he writes : "Copulation is no more rank to me than death is". In Sections 27 and 28, he dwells upon the thrills he experiences when his body comes into physical contact with another body :

> In this then a touch ? quivering me to a new identity,
> Flames and ether making a rush for my veins......

The extreme sensuousness of his nature was the source and final determinant of his songs of love. All sounds, whether of art or nature, were as if music to him from childhood, all sights lovely, all contact intoxicating :

> Mine is no callous shell,
> I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,
> ....
> To touch my person to someone else's is about as much as I can stand.

The damp of night was more convincing to him than logic and sermons. His descriptions of nature are rich with the imagery of sense, as in the beautiful passage beginning "Press close barebosom'd night."[1] He called himself the "caresser of life"[2] in all its aspects, the gross as well as the refined, and he frankly announced that he was not sentimentalist, but a believer in the flesh and the appetites, turbulent and sensual. The sensual realism of his poems of sex, the most characteristic of which were grouped together under the title *Children of Adam*, is notorious.

In one of these poems he writes so boldly as to shock the conservative type of reader :

> Give me now libidinous joys only !
> Give me the drench of my passions ! Give me life coarse and rank !
> To day, I go consort with nature's darlings—to night too
> I am for those who believe in loose delight—I share the mid-night orgies of young men ;
> ....
> I take for my love some prostitute—
>
> (*Native Moments*)

In another poem (*Once I Pass'd through a Populous City*) he recalls his passionate experience with a woman whom he met casually and "who detained me for love of me."

A very interesting poem is *Spontaneous Me* which, again shows Whitman's uninhibited treatment of sex. Here are some lines illustrative of his frankness in this sphere :

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1. Section 21 of *Song of Myself*.
2. Section 13 of *Song of Myself*.

> Love-thoughts, love-juice, love-odor, love-yielding, love-climbers, and the climbing sap,
> Arms and hands of love, lips of love, phallic thumb of love, breasts of love,...

The following lines from the same poem describe the terrible compulsiveness of youthful passion :

> The limpid liquid within the young man,
> The vex'd corrosion so pensive and so painful,
> The torment, the irritable tide that will not be a rest,
> The young man that flushes and flushes, and the young woman that flushes and flushes,...

But the most revealing of his poems is *A Woman Waits for Me* in which he glorifies sex by saying that "sex contains all". There need not be any shame about sex, he says :

> Without shame the man I like knows and avows the deliciousness of his sex,
> Without shame the woman I like knows and avows hers.

He would not like to associate with "impassive women" ; he wants women who are "warm-blooded and sufficient for me." With a frankness which makes the reader blush he tells women the kind of sexual act they should expect from him :

> I do not hurt you any more than is necessary for you,
> I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for these States, I press with slow rude muscle,
> I brace myself effectually, I listen to no entreaties,
> I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so long accumulated within me.

In *I Sing the Body Electric* he glorifies and exalts the human body :

> Have you ever loved the body of a woman ?
> Have you ever loved the body of a man ?
> If any thing is sacred the human body is sacred...

It is not known whether these passionate poems were the record of his actual experience, or the product of sheer imagination. But that does not matter. He regarded the experiences described in these poems as proper for the poet of democracy and would have wished to have them if he did not. They were written to destroy the literary taboo by which the facts of sex were in his time obscured and distorted and to uphold the contention that whatever is natural is good and a suitable theme for poetry. Though their realism was obviously overdone, Whitman resisted all efforts to persuade him to alter them materially. It is noticeable, however, that in later poems he limited himself to the usual generalisations in dealing with the subject of sex relations, having felt satisfied to have asserted once for all the right to give a free and literal expression to sexual love in poetry.

His love poetry was not always or often the expression of a normal sexual man. His body, with its electric senses, was not the body of an average man. From the records of his life and the testimony of the imagery of his poems, it is clear that his love went out more readily and more frequently to men than to women. Yet his love poems to women are too aglow with fervour to let one doubt that he knew also the love of women. And to this must be added a curious worship of his own body, which a psychiatrist would call autosexuality. There are obvious examples of this in *Song of Myself.* This sexual oversensitiveness made him a writer of great love-poems. But he became a target for the prudish, and he confused and sometimes disgusted his simpler readers.

There has been no good reason to doubt the charge of homosexuality against Whitman. Considering his place and time the *Calamus* poems show an astonishing candour. He probably counted on the fact that only those readers would dare to understand these poems who were constituted like him. Besides, he created a legend of himself, including the myth of the New Orleans lady and his children by her, as an escape and defence. He announces frankly that the *Calamus* poems proceed in "paths untrodden", that they represent an escape "from all the standards hitherto published" in being songs of "manly attachment". They are. They make the matter as plain as words can make it without direct obscenity. The poems contain the homosexual's atavistic sub-conscious memories of the man's house in primitive society projected upon the present social structure and his hopes for it,which are so profoundly mingled with much communistic sentiment : "I believe the main purport of these States is to found a superb friendship, exalted, previously unknown...waiting latent in all men." They contain the usual appeal to Socrates and the common fancy about Christ. They contain the usual symbols and subterfuges but also idealistically tinged homo-erotic carnalities unparalleled in any modern language. The one poem "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand", with its curious Lilliputian fantasy, which throws some doubt on Whitman's robust agressiveness even as a homo-sexual, tells the whole story and reveals the man's nature and appetences. Nor did the thread of self-revelation even thereafter disappear from his work. However hidden or elusive, this expression of his special nature does not cease. He takes final leave of world in "Old Age Echoes" with that central confession on his lips :

> I took composedly upon nature, drink day and night
> the joys of life, and await death with perfect
> equanimity,
> Because of my tender and boundless love for him I love
> and because of his boundless love for me.

13

Walt Whitman:
The Poet of Death

Death is an ever-recurrent theme in the poetry of Whitman. Death haunts *Leaves of Grass* in all its phases. By virtue of his treatment of this theme, he has been called a great poet of death. Many are the references to death in his *Song of Myself.* In Section 6, for instance, he speaks of the death of the young and the old and of their immortality :

> What do you think has become of the young and the
> old men ?
> And what do you think has become of the women and
> children ?
> They are alive and well somewhere ;
> The smallest sprout shows there is really no death :
> And if ever there was, it led forward life......

In Section 7, he again takes an optimistic view of death :

> Has any one supposed it lucky to be born ?
> I hasten to inform him or her, it is just as lucky to die,
> and I know it.

In the same Section, he speaks of immortality :

> I am the mate and companion of people, all
> immortal and fathomless as myself ;
> (They do not know how immortal, but I know.)

In Section 48, he says :

> No array of terms can say how much I am at peace
> about God, and about death.

In Section 49, he throws a challenge at death :

> And as to you, Death and you bitter hug of mortality, it
> is idle to try to alarm me.

The theme of death is, indeed inseparable from Whitman's best poems. Death is the subject of his two master-pieces, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* and *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd.* The death of the female bird in the first-named poem is a symbol of the stern fact of death in all Nature. It is the sea which whispers the word death to the poet.

Whereto answering, the sea
Delaying not, hurrying not,
Whisper'd me, through the night.........
Lisp'd to me the slow and delicious word **death**.

But as the sea ("The old crone rocking her cradle") symbolizes motherhood, the implication of the sea's whisper is that death is but a natural transition to re-birth. The poem thus ends on a note of hope and faith. Even if the poem be an elegy on the death of some one close to the poet, it ends with a solemn acceptance of death.

The other poem is an elegy proper, written to mourn the death of President Abraham Lincoln. Death here is the central theme. Offering his spring of lilac and his flowers to Lincoln's coffin, the poet says :

All over bouquets of roses,
O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies
....
With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,
For you and the coffins all of you O death.

The hermit thrush in the poem sings the "carol of death" :

Come lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later delicate death.

This poem, too, ends with a philosophic acceptance of death as a natural phenomenon.

These two poems represent something remarkable, a deliberate cultivating of a new kind of elegiac mood, addressing oneself to death as part of the whole cosmic process which includes life itself. This has led some of his more recent critics to say that he is really a gloomy death-wisher. But that is a misunderstanding of his whole concept of death as part of a cyclical, cosmic dance of life. Whitman sees this rhythm, this cosmic dance, everywhere—even in a dung-heap. A dung-heap is refuse ; it is also new life. That concept of the rhythm of life is both elegiac and hopeful. It is elegiac in the sense that we have to prepare to lose ourselves in that sea, in that flux, in that rhythm, but only ultimately to find ourselves in it.

Then there are the two other elegies on Lincoln's death. The grief of the poet in both these poems is inconsolable. *O Captain ! My Captain* ! ends with the following lines :

But I with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

Hush'd be the Camps To-day ends as follows :

As they invault the coffin there,
Sing—as they close the doors of earth upon him—one verse,
For the heart of hearts of soldiers.

The theme of death is prominent in the poems labelled *Drum-Taps*. In these poems too there is little consolation. Outstanding as a poem of death is *Come up from the Fields Father* in which the news of the death of the only son of the family stuns all the members. The letter received by the family says that Pete will soon be better, but while the members of the family stand at the door Pete is dead already : "The only son is dead." The mother can now no longer eat or sleep. She weeps and weeps, and she longs for death to unite her with her son :

> By day her meals untouch'd, then at night fitfully
> sleeping, often waking,
> In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with one deep
> longing
> To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son.

In *Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night* also there is stark tragedy without any consolation :

> I rose from the chill ground and folded my soldier well
> in his blanket,
> And buried him where he fell.

Dirge for Two Veterans mourns the death of two soldiers—a father and his son who fell in the battle almost at the same time :

> For the son is brought with the father,
> (In the foremost ranks of the fierce assault they fell,
> Two veterans son and father dropt together,
> And the double grave awaits them.)

At times, particularly in his later years, Whitman expresses a common and conventional feeling about death and immortality. For instance, in a poem of 1881, referring to the death of his mother he refers to her as "buried and gone, yet buried not, gone not from me", which is commonplace consolation.

Death in Whitman is no mere biological fact, but rather a sort of passage, a mystically foreshadowed and necessary way of re-union with cosmic energy—with the divine energy. The human spirit, he wrote in 1860, "ebbs like the ocean, but the cosmic process seems for ever the same". Life and death are by Whitman fused into a universal synthesis that is conceived sometimes as personal immortality and sometimes as re-absorption into an affirmative cosmic process that is occasionally identified with God and on other occasions seems to produce a succession of gods. The cosmic will to Whitman is purposeful, not blind as it is to Schopenhauer.

It is true that Whitman was a poet dedicated to life, but in all great poetry love and life have been stated in terms of death :

> And I will show that whatever happens to anybody, it
> may be turn'd to beautiful results—and I will show
> that nothing can happen more beautiful than death

It is through death that Whitman can see into the heart of creation—where of course life also is. At the centre of the universe love and death lie down together. From the beginning he had announced that he would accept everything. All is beautiful and good, he says, and death should be. He contemplates ugly things —ulcers, monsters, and the carnage of battle—with a fierceness of attention which shows that he will love them in spite of everything.

14

Symbolism in Whitman's Poetry

According to an eminent critic, "the greatest poet is not he who has done the best ; it is he who *suggests* the most ; he, not all whose meaning is at first obvious, and who leaves you much to desire, to explain, to study, much to complete in your turn."

"No one will get at my verses", Whitman declared, "who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly towards art or aestheticism." Whitman's poetry is not to be viewed purely as a literary performance, nor should it be viewed as a merely sociological performance.

The first quotation above recognizes the validity and desirability of symbolism in poetry while the second quotation states Whitman's claim that symbolism is an important characteristic of his work. Symbolism does, indeed permeate the poetic work of Whitman.

In *Song of Myself* "I" not only refers to Whitman himself but has a symbolic significance. This "I" has a universal aspect and may be regarded as conveying to us the idea of a citizen of the universe. When in Section 1 he says : "For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you" he allows himself to merge with all mankind. Similarly, when in Section 3 he says : "Clear and sweet is my Soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not in my Soul", he equates his own soul with all other things in the universe. Certainly the use of "I" frequently refers to Whitman as an individual and has an egotistical application, but the universal aspect of "I" cannot be ignored.

In Section 6 of *Song of Myself* the grass is used as a symbol. There are at least five symbolic meanings that Whitman attaches to the grass—(*i*) The grass may be the flag of the poet's disposition, woven out of hopeful green stuff. (*ii*) The grass may be the "handkerchief of the Lord, a scented gift and rememberancer." (*iii*) The grass is itself a child, a baby of the vegetation. (*iv*) The grass may be a "uniform hieroglyphic". (*v*) The grass may be looked at as "the beautiful uncut hair of graves."

In Section 3, the "loving bed-fellow" sleeping at the poet's side seems to be symbolic of God who keeps company with the poet.

In Section 11, the twenty-eight young men are symbolic of the twenty-eight imperfections of human nature, while the handsome and richly-dressed lady symbolises the Soul who surveys those imperfections. Although this Section is a piece of exquisite sensuous description, yet its symbolic significance should not be lost sight of.

The Sleepers is a highly symbolical poem. "Night" in this poem finally signifies the grave and "sleep" symbolises death. In his fantasy the poet assumes various roles—those of a lonely woman, an adolescent, a sleepless widow, etc. No matter what the social status or geographical location, all people become equal in sleep—"one is no better than the other." They are all restored by the rest and quiet of ordinary sleep. The sleepers are beautiful in the peace of the night. But the soul is always beautiful. Death takes the soul out of the world back into the "garden", where it patiently awaits a new incarnation. Sleep now becomes a symbol not simply of death, but of the interval between incarnations. The "I" of the poem personifies the principle of reincarnation. "I too pass from the night ;/I stay away O night, but I return to you again and love you."

Crossing Brooklyn Ferry is another symbolical poem. The basic symbol here is the "ferry". The poet feels a oneness in spirit with all the men and women who have crossed the river on the same ferry. Eventually the poem itself becomes a ferry, shuttling across the river of time and carrying the poet's thoughts, wishes, and sympathy beyond the bounds of his finite life. The water, the current of the incoming tide, and the time of day (near sunset) have symbolical connotations of life and death. In Section 6 of the poem, the dark shadows symbolise a period of doubt and uncertainty through which Whitman had passed. This is a bit of subjective symbolism which is somewhat irrelevant to the central theme of the poem.

Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking too has its symbolism. The theme of the poem is how the boy Whitman developed into a man and a poet. The death of the female bird symbolises the fact of death in the natural order of things. When the poet asks for a "clew", he seeks an answer to the meaning of suffering and death in the natural world. The bird, a symbol of Nature, does not provide the answer. The answer comes from the sea, the "old crone rocking her cradle". The sea thus symbolises motherhood, which in other words means birth and life. The sea whispers the word "death", but since this word comes from the old crone rocking a cradle, the implication is that death is only a natural transition to re-birth.

In *When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd*, Whitman employs several symbols—lilacs, Venus, (the evening star), and the hermit thrush. All these symbols have been taken from the time of year when Lincoln's death occurred, namely, from spring. All these are symbols of re-birth and resurrection. The heart-shaped leaves are symbolic of love. The thrush is also a symbol of reconciliation. "Through the skilful use of his symbol—the star, the cloud, the lilac bush, and the bird—Whitman re-creates the sweeping drama of Lincoln's death and the national mourning without once mentioning the President's death." The star symbolises President Lincoln, and each of the adjectives applied to the star—'powerful', 'western', 'fallen'—also applies to Lincoln. If the star is symbolic of Lincoln, the black cloud hiding the star symbolises Lincoln's death. The lilac bush is a symbol of life, love, or affection, and the breaking of the twig is the beginning of a symbolic act of love. The lilac bush with its rich colour and strong perfume represents physical life. The hermit thrush, through the song that it sings by itself, symbolises spiritual life. The bird's song is "Death's outlet song of life" in that it is a song in celebration of death as an outlet (or re-birth) into the spiritual life. The journey of Lincoln's coffin through the natural setting is symbolic of a journey through life. The journey through the mourning cities seems a journey through death. The act of offering the spring of lilac is symbolic of the bestowal of life on the dead, the gift of eternal spiritual life to the physically dead. The pictures to adorn Lincoln's burial-house will depict scenes of Nature in all its glorious abundance as well as scenes of human life in thickly populated cities. Such pictures will, therefore, be symbolic of Lincoln's breadth of vision and amplitude of soul.

In *Passage to India*, India does not stand merely for itself. It certainly begins by being simply the geographic east, but it quickly becomes the past of religions, bibles, legends, fables, and the garden from which man launched his exploration. It ends by becoming the rich land where man can recover original innocence and live in harmony with Nature. The word "passage" itself has been used in a symbolic sense. It does not merely mean a voyage to India through the Suez Canal but includes all the expeditions in history and all man's ceaseless exploration since his departure from the Garden of Eden. It also includes the voyage of mind's return to innocence and primitive power.

Whitman's symbols in most of his poems are the ocean, the stars, the birds, the calamus plant, the lilac, and they all have an even intelligible objective and even universal meaning. Most of his symbols are of fecundity and growth, or, closely akin to birth, death, and resurrection : the grass growing out of the rich compost of other lives, the perpetual "journey-work" of the stars, the phallic calamus plant and the heart-shaped lilac, the thrush singing an acceptance of death. The sea splashes him with its "amorous wet", the stars communicate their omens, and the sun silently ripens his song. He is fond of botanical imagery, and he frequently thinks of his poems as vegetation.

His images are continually becoming symbols whose meanings fluctuate. Thus in *Out of the Cradle* the mocking-bird is, on one level, an actual grief-stricken song-bird. On another level, the bird symbolises the actual or imaginary experience of the poet himself. Furthermore, the mocking-bird is the voice of nature.

As a symbolist, Whitman wished to abolish distinctions between the subjective and objective worlds and accepted the doctrine that the universe may be apprehended through the sensations and intuitions of the poet. He thought that art could be based on a deep-level of consciousness than had been done before. As a consequence, he broke away from established rhythms and verse forms and introduced a freer, more flowing versification.

Whitman was often symbolic in his poetry to a degree equalled only by the much latter surrealists.[1] He wanted to convey the unexpressed, or the inexpressible except by indirect means, which is now recognised as a trend in modern Art. One consequence of this was that his symbols were discussed in terms of their direct and prosaic (and often indecent) meanings, rather than of their indirect and poetical significance. Some of his best lines have a symbolic force which makes itself strongly felt. In his early poetry, however, he is sometimes merely fantastic in his symbolism. There are frequent absurdities in word, phrase, image and symbol. Absurd, if we take him seriously, is :

> By my life-pumps ! becoming already a creator,
> Putting myself here and now to the ambush'd womb of
>   the shadows.
>
> (*Song of Myself*, Section 41)

In his early poetry his symbolism, especially in sexual matters, is difficult to interpret, though he could also, in sexual reference, and elsewhere, see the magnificent :

> Bridegroom night of love working surely and softly into
>   the prostrate dawn,
> Undulating into the willing and yielding day,
> Lost in the cleave of the clasping and sweet-flesh'd day.

Symbolism was the native language of his poetry. In his later poems his symbolism is no longer eccentric, and seldom erotic. *When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd* is conducted throughout by powerful and beautiful symbols, profound in their significance. The fallen western star, the perpetually blooming lilacs, the thrush warbling in the pines and cedars, the long black smoke trial of Lincoln's funeral train drifting over the daily usages of the land—this symbolism is controlled, expressive, and beautiful.

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[1] Surrealism, the name given to an art movement, may be described as the expression of dreams, both waking and sleeping, their symbols, and deep fantasies of the sub-conscious. (The surrealists chose their subject-matter from symbolism provided by the sub-conscious.)

15

The Epic Quality of "Leaves of Grass"

Many critics and commentators are of the view that *Leaves of Grass* is not merely a collection of lyric verses but that it qualifies as a national epic embodying the reality and the ideal of American life

Whitman himself believed that his book had the basic nature and general scope of the traditional national epic. His views on the nature of poetry as stated in 1855 Preface and in *Democratic Vistas* show that he wished his *Leaves of Grass* to be recognised as the epic of America. In *A Backward Glance Ov'r Travel'd Road* (1888), he attempts an assessment of his verse : "As America fully and fairly constructed is the legitimate result and evolutionary outcome of the past, so I would dare to claim for my verse." The Old World, he points out : "has had the poems of myths, fictions, feudalism, conquest, caste, dynastic wars, and splendid exceptional characters, but the new World needs the poems of realities and science and of the democratic average and basic equality." Instead of the splendid exceptional characters of the epics of the past, the modern epic has to portray simply man, the human being.

In *Inscriptions*[1] and *Starting from Paumanok*, there are many indications of the epic nature of *Leaves of Grass.* In the very opening poem, Whitman begins with "One's-Self I Sing", "The Female equally with the Male I Sing", "The Modern Man I Sing." The traditional epic generally opens in the same manner, namely, "I Sing." In the second poem, *As I Ponder'd in Silence*, the Muse is invoked and reassured. The epics of the past had as their subject the "theme of war, fortune of battles, the making of perfect soldiers." Whitman assures the Muse that he too sings of War. But the battle-field in his case is the world ; it is a battle "For life and death, for the Body and for the eternal Soul". Clearly the central point of this poem is that Whitman's verse qualifies as an epic, even if judged by the criterion of past epics, provided that the words 'war' and 'battle' are interpreted in a wider sense.

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[1] The title of a group of poems the first of which is *One's Self Sing* and the second *As I Ponder'd in Silence.*

In *Starting from Paumanok*, he indicates his plan for covering the entire nation in his poetry :

> Solitary, singing in the west, I strike up for a New World.

His poems should be regarded as "chants for Americans" :

> Take my leaves America, take them South and take them North,
> Make welcome for them everywhere for they are your own offspring.

In *Song of the Exposition*, the form is epic though the tone is comic :

> Come Muse migrate from Greece and Ionia,
> Cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts.

It is true that by installing the Muse amid the drain-pipes, artificial fertilizers, and kitchen utensils, the poet lowers her dignity. But in *By Blue Ontario's Shore*, he elevates the Muse into a "phantom gigantic superb, with a stern visage" who calls upon the poet to :

> Chant me the poem, it said, that comes from the soul of America, chant me the carol of victory,
> ....
> And sing me before you go the song of the throes of Democracy.

It is to be noted that instead of following the traditional manner of the poet to appeal to the Muse for aid and help, Whitman elicits an appeal from the Muse to the poet to sing about vital themes.

The hero of Whitman's epic is different from the heroes of the epics of the past. The hero of the past epics was a man with heroic qualities, a kind of superman. The heroic qualities of Whitman's hero (the modern man of "One's-Self I Sing") lies in the *selfhood* common to every man. Whitman would have his country people believe that every one of them is potentially an epic hero if he is sufficiently aware of the richness latent in his selfhood, if he celebrates his vital procreative role, and if he is capable of a certain depth of feeling.

Drum-Taps illustrates the victory of the American epic hero "en-masse". No individual is singled out from the others for heroic performance. The emphasis throughout these war poems is on the large numbers of people engaged in a common national endeavour and bound together by the spirit of comradeship. These poems show that the American Civil War proved the heroic quality of an epic magnitude of America's "children en-masse."

The two poems celebrating Abraham Lincoln (*Memories of President Lincoln* and *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd*) depict the hero as possessing qualities similar to those of the soldiers en-masse. This epic hero is the "powerful western fallen star" ; he is the captain of the ship whose loss is universally lamented ; he is the dear commander of the soldiers ; but he is above all the "departing comrade" who possessed an unlimited capacity for love.

The epic hero of *Leaves of Grass* is related by Whitman to the "resistless gravitation of spiritual law." Such a relationship may be deemed to correspond to the mythological background of the hero of the traditional epic. The whole section of *Leaves of Grass* from "Proud Music of the Storm" to "Whispers of Heavenly Death" shows the hero of this epic as possessing "religious" convictions, as aware of the spiritual world, and as being immortal. Even the gods in this modern epic are spoken of in democratic terms. For instance, the poet exclaims thus in *Passage to India* :

> Surrounded, copest, frontest God, yieldest, the aim
> attain'd,
> As fill'd with friendship, love complete, the Elder Brother
> found,
> The Younger melts in fondness in his arms.

Thus God is regarded as the "final" comrade. The relationship with God is one of an ideal brotherhood, a perfect comradeship.

Whitman's epic embodied America's image of itself even as it creates that image—the American dream, the American vision during the nineteenth century. Whitman's faith was the American faith of the time. Whitman insisted on being the poet of science and democracy and, above all, of religion. In that role he defined the nineteenth century's view of the universe and reflected it in his epic, as Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton reflected their own times in their respective epic poems. Thus has *Leaves of Grass* a real claim to be regarded as America's epic. It embodies America's first terrible trial in the shape of the Civil War and it prophesised the greatness of America. It is a reflection of America's character, of America's soul, and of America's achievements and aspirations.

"Walt Whitman wanted freedom for self-realisation for himself and all the millions who populated the world. Quite early in his career he came to understand the way that such-self-realisation could be achieved, in poetry, in a new American poem which would celebrate its culture so as to make the power for self-realisation for the first time spontaneously available to all comers. His readers would thus become celebrants ; with him they would celebrate themselves in their world, hence really come to know themselves. In the familiar words of the 1885 Preface to *Song of Myself* : 'The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir...Here is the hospitality which for ever indicates heroes...The greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into anything small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe. He is a seer...he is individual... he is complete in himself...the others are as good as he, only he sees it and they do not.........But folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects...they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls

"Such words show a Whitman who feels that he finally discovered the way to the poem made out of that living language which will warm the world with one great moral soul. Such a poem can only be epic in scope. It is to do for modern man what the epic did for men of the outworn past. Yet it cannot be in form like the traditional epic; its form must be self-transcending as must its heroes. Whitman's world is over-flowing with that "hospitality" which, as he says, for ever "indicates heroes." If all men are heroes, then the heroism of modern society has infinitely more aspects and qualities than can be fused in the single hero of the traditional epic. Thus Whitman conceived of an American equivalent of the epic and strove throughout his life to create one. An American epic would be one whose spirit would totally satisfy the needs of democracy in the aggregate. The working of its form and its language would be so managed as immediately to relate the reader to the milieu and the ambiance, the culture, which the form and the language project. Feeling the deep need of his culture to find an adequate poetic image, Whitman wrote *Song of Myself*. Indeed, he repeatedly revised and re-arranged the whole of *Leaves of Grass* and *Song of Myself* with it, perhaps in order to make it into a total image—the full and complete surrogate for the traditional epic. But *Song of Myself* is the clearest, surest, and complete product of his desire to create an American epic."

16

The Myth of America Or Whitman's Notion of America

The three themes which stand out conspicuously in Whitman's poetry are : (*i*) American people and American democracy ("en-masse") ; (*ii*) sex and senses ; and (*iii*) death. Whitman is pre-eminently the singer of the American nation and the American democracy. He was keenly aware of, and he frankly pointed out, the glaring defects of democracy as it was functioning in America in his time, but he still took an exalted view of his countrymen and visualised a great democratic future for them. He foresaw a great and noble destiny for America. He found the sources of evil in tyranny or superstition rather than in human nature, and out of the comparatively free environment of America, he expected the emergence and growth of a proud, noble, and ambitious race. This great and free race, already in the making, needed a literature that should celebrate the democratic present of America. For this reason, Whitman would not sing of kings and nobles and priests, but of the "divine average" of American citizenship, engaged in the homely yet miraculous tasks of every day :

> In the labour of engines and trades, and the labour of
> fields, I find the developments,
> And find the eternal meanings.
>
> (*A Song for Occupations*)

He filled his poems to the brim with the America he loved, the America whose unique political mission and spacious scenery stirred and inspired him. His poetry contains memorable, panoramic, processional pictures of American people and American scenes. The blacksmith, the Negro teamster, the butcher, the farmer returning from the fields, the mother sewing, the soldier keeping watch on the battle-field, the prostitute, the pioneer, and hundreds of others—all move in a crowd, and all are full of life and vitality. The varied occupations and trades are enumerated in his pages with an equal vividness—house-building, shingle-dressing, ship-joining, ferrying, mining, iron-smelting, stone-cutting, cotton-loading, etc. The whole wide range of the American physical scene is brought before us—the northern ocean, Niagara, Georgia marshes, mid-western prairies, arid plateaus, the vast peaks of the Rockies, and the long coastline of the Pacific. If his grandiose attempt to cram a continent within the covers of a book sometimes betrays him into dreary cataloguing, he nevertheless succeeds, as no other writer succeeds, in conveying to the reader a broad, panoramic grasp of America's spaciousness, her opulence, and her varied multitudinous life."

The catalogues which lend a distinctively American flavour to Whitman's poetry are found interspersed in his entire work. There are several Sections in *Song of Myself* in which such catalogues occur. Section 8, for instance, contains pictures of the heavy omnibus, the clank of the shod horses, the excited crowd and the policeman working his passage to the centre of the crowd, the fury of roused mobs, etc. Section 10, contains pictures of the Yankee clipper, the boatman, clam-diggers, the marriage of the trapper with a Red girl having long eyelashes, and the runaway slave. In Section 14, the poet tells us that he is enamoured of men that live among cattle, or taste of the ocean or woods, and that he is enamoured "of the builders and steerers of ships, and the wielders of axes and mauls, and the drivers of horses.' Section 15 contains an extraordinarily long catalogue of various kinds of people—the carpenter, the pilot, the duck-shooter, the deacons, the spinning-girl, the machinist, the gate-keeper, the driver of the express wagon, the group of newly-come immigrants, the book-keeper, the shoe-maker, the conductor, the drover, the pedlar, the opium-eater, the prostitute with her "blackguard oaths", the President holding a cabinet council, the fare-collector on the train, and so on. In Section 16, the poet describes himself as a comrade of Californians, of free north-westerners, of craftsmen, of coalmen, and he identifies himself with persons of every trade and every rank—farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker, lawyer, physician, priest, etc. In Section 23, Whitman hails the achievements of materialism and positive science and offers his tribute to the chemist, the mariner, the geologist, the mathematician even though his own field of exploration is different. In Section 26, he gives us a catalogue of different kinds of sounds in the life of the American people. Section 33 contains another long catalogue of a variety of scenes and occupations.

In *A Song for Occupations*, Whitman elevates to dignity every kind of human being. Just because a human being was once a drunkard, or a thief, or a prostitute, and just because a human being is no scholar, it does not mean that they are not immortals. Even the American President is not greater than such people. (This is his conception of the "divine average"). In Section 6, of the same poem, he gives us a long list of American occupations some of which are "leather-dressing, coach-making, boiler-making, rope-twisting, distilling, sign-painting, lime-burning, cotton-picking, electroplating, electrotyping, stereotyping. In the well-known poem *I Sing the Body Electric*, we have another catalogue—the group of labourers, the young-fellow hoeing corn, the wrestle of wrestlers, the apprenticeboys, the fire men, etc.

In another poem, Whitman describes persons of various trades singing while at the same time working :

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear ;
Those of mechanics—each one singing his, as it should be,
blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his...
The mason singing his...

"Whitman thus rejoiced in free, materialistic America ; but neither mere freedom nor mere materialism alone sufficed him. The best fruit of a democracy, he felt, would be the highest development of the individual. Freedom should develop into rich, luxuriant, and varied personalism ; and the crown of free citizenship should be fraternal and spiritual in nature. For the old-fashioned celebration of feudal loyalty, therefore, Whitman substituted the praise of democratic brotherhood. Even on the brink of the Civil War, in the midst of violent sectional hatreds, he sang :

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble...
With the love of comrades,
With the life-long love of comrades.
(*For You O Democracy*)

And at the close of the war he could still sing, undaunted :

Be not disheartened—Affection shall solve the problems
of freedom yet ;
Those who love each other shall become invincible—
they shall yet make Columbia victorious.....
One from Massachusetts shall be a Missourian's comrade :
From Maine, and from hot Carolina, and another, an
Oregonese, shall be friends triune.
More precious to each other than all the riches of the
earth. (*Over the Carnage*, etc.)

And not only fraternal love, but spirituality, as Whitman understood that word, was to be the final fruitage of American society. Bound to no formal creed, Whitman's ideal America was to adopt a religion which exalted the sense of wonder, the hearty acceptance of the world-scheme, zest for life, a haughty freedom from conventions, and, above all, a glorification of the life of the "divine average". And the priests of Whitman's American religion were to be the genuinely American poets—who should kindle the slumbering American spirit with songs suited to a new, democratic nation. Such is the message of that vigorous chant of Americanism, *By Blue Ontario's Shore.*

'Of all races and eras, These States, with veins full of
poetical stuff, most need poets, and are to have the
greatest, and use them the greatest.
Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much
as their poets shall.'

Whitman, it is evident, aspired to be not merely a poet, but a prophet as well. Others had hymned the national ideal partially ; he would hymn it fully. He, therefore, made himself uniquely the poet of American democracy "

For reasons that should be obvious from what has been stated above, *Leaves of Grass* may be regarded as "the embodiment of the American reality and ideal." *Leaves of Grass* may be looked upon as a national epic ; it is an epic of America. But it is an epic with a difference. The traditional epic depicts exceptional, heroic characters. The hero in *Leaves of Grass* is simply "man". As Whitman himself said, "One's Self I Sing...The Modern Man I Sing." Whitman's poetry encompasses the entire American nation : "Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for New World."

(*Starting from Paumanok*)

The heroic qualities of man in *Leaves of Grass* lie not in superhuman characteristics but in the "self-hood" common to everyman. Every man in America, according to Whitman, is potentially an epic hero, if he is sufficiently aware of the potentiality of his selfhood. Whitman does not single out any individual from the rest for heroic deeds. Throughout his work his emphasis is on the ranks, the large mass of men welded together in comradeship and a common national purpose.

17

The Problem of Structure

Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking is a good example of the close-knit structure employed by Whitman in his best poems. The Prologue states the theme of the poem, although the single sentence wherein the theme is stated is long, winding, and involved. The Prologue describes the physical sensations of the locale and the emotional effect on the little boy of the events he witnessed. Then follows the drama of the mocking-birds singing happily together, and the lament of the he-bird for his lost mate. The main tension of the poem is created by the boy's intense desire to understand the meaning of the tragedy, the meaning of death. The answer to the boy's questioning comes not from the grief-stricken he-bird but from the sea which whispers to him the delicious word "death" :

> Whereto answering, the sea
> Delaying not, hurrying not,
> Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak,
> Lisp's to me the low and delicious word death,
> And again death, death, death...

The message of the. sea, the "old crone rocking the cradle" comes as an illumination that transports the boy into manhood, and poethood. Even though the view that the poem describes the writer's reconciliation to the loss of a loved one, may be admitted, the real theme of the poem is how the boy became a man and a poet.

When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd is perhaps the most skilfully constructed of all Whitman's poems. The poem, a genuine elegy, begins with the lilac and the star, which the ever-returning spring will always bring back to the poet. The function of this "trinity" (the lilac, the star, and spring) is to remind the poet constantly of "him I love." The star is a symbol of Abraham Lincoln whose death the poet mourns in this elegy (without, of course, mentioning his name). In Section 3, the poet breaks a spring from the lilac bush as an offering to Lincoln's coffin. In Section 4, the hermit-thrush is described as singing "death's outlet song of life." In Sections 5 and 6, the journey of the funeral train carrying the coffin is briefly described. In Section 7, the poet offers the springs from the lilac bushes not only to Lincoln's coffin but to the coffins of all the dead. In Section 8, the poet recalls that a month before Lincoln's death the evening star had seemed to warn him of the approaching tragedy. In Section 9, the thrush seems to demand the poet's attention, but the poet is detained by his grief for his departed comrade whom he calls a star. In Section 10 and 11, the poet describes the manner in which he will commemorate the dead hero and the kind of pictures that should be hung on the walls of the burial-house. In Section 13 and 14, he returns to the hermit-thrush which is imagined as singing a song addressed to "lovely and soothing death." In Section 15, the poet has a vision of the Civil War, with all its slaughter and suffering, but the thought that the dead are now "fully at rest" consoles him. In Section 16, the coffin reaches the end of its journey and comes to rest in "the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim." The poem closes on a note of perfect reconciliation with the loss that had earlier weighed heavily upon the poet's heart. This brief survey of the progress of thought and feeling in the poem shows that there is nothing irrelevant in it and that the transitions from stanza to stanza are logical and natural

Passage to India is another masterpiece showing a firm and close structure. The poet first speaks of the wonders of modern times (the Suez Canal, the mighty rail-road in the New World, and the Atlantic Cable). But the poet, in eulogising the achievements of modern science, would not neglect the past—the "dark unfathom'd retrospect." The essence of the past is India, whose myths and fables must be "eclaircised" (that is, illuminated). Linked with the dark fables and myths is the wealth to be found in poetry and religion, and the grand edifices built from man's religious aspirations and dreams. The poet welcomes the accomplishments of the past with the same joy with which he greets the achievements of his own day. The poet's companion on his *Passage to India* is the soul which is addressed again and again in the poem. The poet is impatient to sail "trackless seas" and to seek "silent thoughts, of Time and Space and Death." The soul, the younger brother, melts in fondness in the arms of the elder brother :

> Reckoning ahead O soul, when thou, the time achiev'd,
> The seas all cross'd, weather'd the capes, the voyage done,
> Surrounded, copest, frontest God, yieldest, the aim attain'd,
> As fill'd with friendship, love complete, the Elder Brother found,
> The Younger melts in fondness in his arms.
>
> (*Lines* 219—223)

This union of the soul with God is "passage to more than India" (Line 224). With a fervour that overwhelms the reader, the poet calls upon the soul for an immediate expeditionary voyage :

> Passage, immediate passage ! the blood burns in my veins !
> Awake O soul ! hoist instantly the anchor !
> ....

> For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
> And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.
> (*Lines* 242-251)

The passage to India includes all the expeditions in history and all man's ceaseless exploration and it includes also the voyage of the mind's return to original innocence and primitive power.

The structure of *The Sleepers*, a highly symbolical poem, is also well-built. Indeed, it has a symmetrical architectural structure. In Section I, of the poem, the poet travels in his dream from sleeper to sleeper, assuming various roles :

> I am the actor and the actress......the voter...the politician,
> The emigrant and the exile...the criminal that stood in the box,
> He who has been famous......

Merely to be alive is happiness enough for any one. In Sections 3, 4 and 6 the poet describes scenes of ship-wreck and battle and narrates the moving story of an Indian squaw who visited his mother and then disappeared for ever. The story of the Indian squaw shows the writer's hatred of Negro slavery. In Section 7, the mood changes to one of joy, and we are given a long succession of people in many conditions and occupations of life. No matter what their social position or place of residence, they all become equal in sleep : "one is no better than the other." The sleepers are beautiful in the peace of the night. But the soul too is always beautiful. Death takes the soul out of the world back into the "garden," where it patiently awaits a new incarnation. Sleep is here a symbol not simply of death, but of the interval between incarnations. In Section 8, we have another catalogue of the sleepers followed by lines which have a deeply religious tone. The poet will pass the "day" that is, the span of his physical existence) and duly return to night, the mother, in order to "rise betimes", meaning that life will be followed by death and that death will be followed by re-birth. Thus the poet gives expression to his religious belief in continued cycles of life.

In *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, the poet considers his ties with the past, present, and future. He thinks of all the men and women who have crossed the river on this same ferry, and experiences imaginatively a oneness in spirit with them. He experiences the same oneness with the people who will cross the river on this ferry in times to come. (Of course, it does not occur to the poet that a bridge might soon be built upon the river thus eliminating the need for a ferry). In a symbolic sense, the poem itself becomes a ferry, shuttling across the river of time. All those people who read this poem can vicariously share the poet's experience and his identification with them. In Section 8, of the poem, the poet feels himself merged into all the people whom he has loved during his lifetime and those whom he anticipates in the future. In Section 9, the poet calls upon the river to flow on, the masts to stand up, the sea-birds to fly on, the ships to pass up or down, the flags of nations to display themselves cities to thrive and expand, and life to go on in all its vigour. In the closing lines the inanimate physical objects are regarded as "beautiful ministers" to the soul and as furnishing their "parts toward eternity." *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* is regarded as one of Whitman's major poems showing his skill in constructing a poetic whole.

Then there are the shorter poems like *Prayer of Columbus*, *The Wound-Dresser*, and *Come From the Fields Father*, which are all masterpieces from the point of view of construction. All these poems are characterised by a unity of thought and singleness of impression and are completely free from any digressions. *Prayer of Columbus* is a monologue in which the speaker, Columbus, surveys his life and affirms his devotion and dedication to God and God's will :

> I will cling fast to Thee, O God, though the waves
> buffet me,
> Thee, Thee at least I know.

In the closing stanza, Columbus sees a vision rewarding him for his loyalty and devotion to his duty and to his God :

> And on the distant waves sail countless ships.
> And anthems in new tongues I hear saluting me.

Pathos is the keynote of *The Wound-Dresser* and *Come From the Fields Father*. *The Wound-Dresser* describes the writer's experiences as a male nurse attending upon the war-wounded in hospitals. The pictures of the various suffering patients are almost gruesome, and together they all contribute to the total effect which is heart-rending pathos :

> The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
> These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep
> in my breast a fire, a burning flame),

The deep sincerity of the writer induces a warm response to his feelings from the reader. *Come From the Fields Father* describes the death, in war, of an only son of a family. A letter is received by the family in calm and beautiful autumn weather when the apples are ripening. The letter is believed to be from Pete, the son, who is away to the wars. When the envelope is opened, it is found that the letter is in somebody else's handwriting and contains the news that Pete has been wounded in the breast. All the members of the family are stunned by the news :

> "Grieve not so, dear mother", the just-grown daughter
> speaks through her sobs.
> The little sisters huddle around speechless and dismay'd,
> "See dearest mother, the letter says Pete will soon be
> better."

But Pete will never be better because "he is dead already, the only son is dead." The closing lines describe the woeful condition of the mother who would herself like to die in order "to follow, to be with her dear dead son." Here is a poem of concentrated pathos without a single superfluous word.

It is Whitman's *Song of Myself* that gives rise to the charge of a want of firm structure in Whitman's work. This poem consists of fiftytwo Sections with no systematic or logical development of thought in them. Critics have certainly tried to establish some sort of unity in the poem, but truly speaking the fiftytwo Sections are loosely held together, with abrupt, and often startling, transitions of thought. If anything holds the various Sections together, it is not a logical development of ideas but the personality of the poet who certainly grips our attention. The long catalogues interspersed in the poem hardly contribute to any unity in the poem ; they rather distract the attention. A critic[1] rightly observes : "The main poem of the book, *Song of Myself*, is a series of utterances, ejaculations, apostrophes, enumerations, associations, pictures, parables, incidents, suggestions, with little or no structural or logical connection, but all emanating from a personality whose presence dominates the page, and whose eye is ever upon us. Without this vivid and intimate sense of the man, or a sane and powerful spirit sustaining ours, the piece would be wild and inchoate."

Another critic[2] commenting on Whitman says : "His mode is reverie ; his voice is that of one talking to himself as he falls asleep in the haze of lazy noon-day or at the onset of night. What binds Whitman's poems together is not the logic of persuasion or pictorial form, but what we have come to lable, a little misleadingly, 'stream-of-consciousness' ; the secret order of repressed wishes and fears that links impression to impression when the conscious mind abdicates or relaxes its control. Dreaming or reminiscing, the poet wavers between what he calls 'vision' and 'fit', an access of heightened awareness that at some moments elates at other moments terrifies him. This alternation of joy, and anxiety sets up poles around which his inner flux of ideas and associations take on objective forms."

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1. John Burroughs
2. Leslie A. Fielder

18

Whitman's Poetic Style and Technique

Whitman's prosody has been the subject of much controversy. Whitman sought a medium in which he could express satisfactorily the expansive soul and the expansive mind and body of democratic men developing in a new continent. The convensions of rhyming or metrical verse did not suit him. The fact that he had something new to say and describe made it imperative for him to break away from orthodoxy. He needed an idiom which was fresh on his tongue and so could be personal and sincere. He felt the need to be free and lavish like his subject-matter. He did not get rid of outworn poetic diction, but he refreshed it with the bold frankness and realism of his speech. Nor did he get much closer to the colloquial language of the people than Bryant or Longfellow. The sources of Whitman's style lie in the flowing rhythms of the Old Testament, in the oratory of Shakespeare's blank verse from which he got his elaborate sentence-structure, and in the French and Italian opera which was both lyric and declamatory, rhythmic in both words and music.

The technical contrivances of his long rolling lines, his catalogues, his exhortations, his lyrics, and his dramatic dialogues with himself can easily be analysed. If metre and rhyme are to be discarded, some other device must be used to secure the unity of impression which is an essential in poetry. Even a superficial study shows Whitman's abundant, sometimes tiresome, use of alliteration, both along the lines and down the line-beginnings. It shows assonance, and internal rhyme, often most skilfully contrived. It shows a general trochaic and dactylic pattern. It reveals a subtle use of caesura, bringing the long lines into parts of different lengths. It also shows a very effective play upon repetition of rhythmic patterns and of words. He built his poems slowly with revisions that kept on until his death, and he slowly perfected the use of these and other devices the governing principle being a rhythmic pattern in his mind, which was his style.

Alliteration, assonance, and internal rhyme are employed with great skill in the poem called "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." The structure of this poem is that of an opera—overture, recitative, musical meditation, the song of the bird as lyric, and the finale. The verse technique of this poem or of "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd should be compared with the sprawl and pull-together of the experimental "*Song of Myself.*" He never wrote better than in some brief passages of "*Song of Myself*", but its new prosody required the firm grip of the later poems to show its success.

His diction enabled him to make a voice for multitudes. It enabled him to put into poetry what current fashion regarded as prosaic. It was very flexible, stretched to any scope, and enabled him (like the makers of new literary languages, Chaucer for example) to say first and best what no one in America had tried to put into literature before. Most of all, it became easy for him to transfer to these rhythms the dramatised ego which he called his soul, and which was the symbol of the inner life of Whitman, and also of his century and his environment as he felt them.

"Thus in a true sense Whitman's style may be called functional. It was admirably adapted to describe the immigrant and emigrant American on the move, the still unshaped landscape of a new continent, the energy and the romance of pioneering, the dreams of a nation sure of an illimitable future, and the revolutionary idea of the modern civilisation finding their greatest release in this same America. It was also an excellent medium for his passionate nature, so often uncontrolled, and responded with a lift toward the sublime when he wrote of religion and of death."

His diction had great disadvantages also. It encouraged the occasional prose-writer and the frequent preacher in Whitman. It favoured ranting and encouraged padding, it offended those readers who had been bred in the great tradition of poetry in English, and therefore it made his reception so difficult that in obstinate reaction he sometimes turned his technique into an eccentricity.

Yet his poetic style must be judged by its best passages, and there it is a new style and often a great one.

According to some, Whitman had no art as a poet. Others regard him as a potent artist, crafty as well as inspired. He certainly had a power with phrases, a fresh power, an originating power, which is strange as the equivalent thing in Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, or any other matter of the great suddenly said. Such a way with words is miraculous. No poet lacking in it can hope for fame. In *Leaves of Grass* it is found abundantly in the first lines of poems :

(*i*) I celebrate myself.
(*ii*) I sing the Body electric.
(*iii*) There was a child went forth every day.
(*iv*) Weapon, shapely, naked, wan !
(*v*) Aloof and light-hearted, I take the open road.
(*vi*) A woman waits for me.
(*vii*) Out of the cradle endlessly rocking.
(*viii*) I hear America singing.
(*ix*) A noiseless, patient spider.

So far as words concerned, Whitman was a poet of the greatest and oddest delicacy and originality and sensitivity. The following expressions illustrate this point :

(1) Blind, loving wrestling touch, sheath'd, hooded, sharp-tooth'd touch. (Section 29).

(2) Smartly attired, countenance smiling, form upright death under the breast-bones, hell under the skull-bones. (*Song of the Open Road*)

(3) Agonies are one of my changes of garments. (Section 33)

He is the poet who saw grass as the "flag of my disposition", who saw the "sharp-peak'd farm-house with its scallop'd scum and slender shoots from the gutters", who heard a plane's "wild ascending lisp", and who saw and heard how at the amputation "what is removed drops horribly in a pail."

This is the poet for whom the sea was "howler and scooper of storms" reaching out to us with "crooked inviting fingers" ; who went by "leaping chasms with a pike-pointed staff, clinging to topples of brittle and blue" ; who, a runaway slave, saw how "my gore dribs, thinned with the ooze of my skin." He told the Muse to

> Cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts.
> That matter of Troy and Achilles' wrath, and Aeneas',
> Odysseus' wanderings.

But his account of the arrival of the illustrious emigre in the New World is even better :

> Bluff'd not a bit by drain-pipe, gasometer, artificial
> fertilizers,
> Smiling and pleas'd with palpable intent to stay,
> She's here, install'd amid the kitchenware.

He says :

> I project my hat, sit shame-faced, and beg. (Section 37).
> Enough ! Enough ! Enough !
> Somehow I have been stunn'd. Stand back !
> Give me a little time beyond my cuff'd head, slumbers,
> dreams, gaping,
> I discover myself on the verge of a usual mistake.
> (Section 38).
>
> The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,
> It wrenches such ardors from me I did not know I
> possess'd them,
> It sails me, I dab with bare feet, they are lick'd by the
> indolent waves,
>
> ....
>
> And that we call Being. (*Song of Myself*, Section 26)

This originality is often at Whitman's command :

> I am a dance—play up there ! the fit is whirling me
> fast !
> I am the ever-laughing—it is new moon and twilight,

I see the hiding of douceurs, I see nimble ghosts whichever way I look,

…………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………

Onward me move, a gay gang of blackguards !……

(*The Sleepers*)

Very often the things presented by Whitman form nothing but a list :

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his fore-plane whistles its wild ascending lisp,
The married and unmarried children drive home to their Thanksgiving dinner…………………

(*Song of Myself*, Section 15)

It is only a list—but what a list ! and in what different way—likeness and opposition and continuation and climax and anti-climax—the transitions are managed !

Sometimes Whitman takes what appears to be an unpromising subject and treats it with an unexpected tenderness and subtlety and understanding. Such is the passage describing a woman peeping at men bathing naked.

Few poets have shown more of the tears of things, and the joy of things, and of the reality beneath either tears or joy. Even his most general or political statements sometimes are good :

When liberty goes out of a place it is not the first to go nor the second or third to go,
It waits for all the rest to go, it is the last.

(*To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire*)

He can say about doubters, in the most improbable and explosive of juxtapositions :

I know every one of you, I know the sea of torment, doubt, despair and unbelief.
How the flukes splash ! How they contort rapid as lightning, with splashes and spouts of blood !

(Section 43)

Only he could have said about God :

As the hugging and loving Bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night, and withdraws at the break of day with stealthy tread
Leaving me baskets cover'd with white towels, swelling the house with their plenty !

Here are some typical beginnings of poems :

(1) City of orgies, walks, and joys……
(2) Not heaving from my ribb'd breast only…
(3) O take my hand Walt Whitman ! Such gliding wonders ! Such sights and sounds !

(*Salut Au Monde !*)

Not many poets have written better, in more convincing and more individual language, about the world's "gliding wonders".

It is not in individual lines and phrases, but in passages of some length, that Whitman is at his best. In certain passages, Whitman has something difficult to express, but he expresses it with complete success, in language of the most dazzling originality.

But a poet must also be an architect of poems, if only so that a fine line may become still finer by benefit of context. Here Whitman fails quite as often as he succeeds. His best poems are organised with a superb subtlety, not only the two masterpieces (*Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* and *When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd*), but many a lyric of which two perfect examples are *I Saw-in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing*, and *A Noiseless, Patient Spider*. The form of these two lyrics is flawless, befitting the importance which each subject had for Whitman—comradeship in the one case, separateness in the other. A great many of Whitman's poems, however, both short and long, are without discoverable organisation. He is notorious for his catalogues of details. Now and then he succeeds with this device, but more often, as in "Salut au Monde !" he gives such lengthy details as to invite parody. There are pages and pages in *Leaves of Grass* which few persons read. Whitman had the wrong notion that everything he said must be right because he said it.

There is enough of bad poetry in Whitman and this bad poetry has scared away most of the serious readers of modern poetry who talk of his poems without any real liking or knowledge.

The form employed by Whitman is one of the factor obstructing full appreciation of his poetry. All primitive poetry is in fixed verse. A form that is neither verse nor prose is a late and learned invention. As a poet of democracy, Whitman presented himself as a person of peculiar and perverse moral atmosphere using as his means of expression a form as remote as possible from all tradition and normal instinct. He was impatient of the discipline of verse and he believed that a true American poetry should break with all traditions of form as well as of substance. He did have occasional hankerings after rhythms and measures that hummed in his ears.

Thus he begins *A Boston Ballad* :

> To get betimes in Boston town I rose this morning early

The *Song of the Broad-Axe* begins thus :

> Weapon shapely, naked, wan,
> Head from the mother's bowels drawn,

and the *Song of the Universal* in this manner :

> Come, said the Muse,
> Sing me a song no poet has yet chanted,
> Sing me the universal.

But he lacked both patience and desire to continue with the indicated rhythms. Yet many of his lines tend to fall into metrical structures of which he was probably not fully aware. Some of these lines may be quoted here :

(1) As a father to his father going takes his children along with him.
(2) Now we have met, we have looked, we are safe.
(3) Here the frailest leaves of me and yet my strongest lasting.
(4) We found our own, O my soul, in the calm and cool of the outbreak.
(5) Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.
(6) Or the brown land and the blue sea for maps and charts.

The form that Whitman invented as his medium of expression should not be depreciated. It is a genuine form ; it is a frequently great and noble form. But it was the least calculated "to teach the average man the glory of his daily walk and trade", because it could not reach that average man's ear. Despite himself, Whitman constantly slipped back into those rhythmic melodies that are so deeply rooted in the nature of literature and of mankind itself.

In his style, as well as in his transcendentalist and nationalistic message, Whitman carried to their logical conclusion tendencies that had long been evident in romantic poetry. These tendencies influenced his verse-forms, his diction, and his method of organisation. For nearly a century, romantic verse-forms had become more and more diversified. Whitman, seeking a medium fit for his vast American theme, diversified them still further. Discarding metre and rhyme, he adopted a rhythmical, irregular chant that, in its cadences, repetitions, and parallelisms, is similar to the harmonies of the biblical Psalms. His innovations in diction were also striking. Wordsworth had tried to avoid the poetic diction of eighteenth century poetry and to use a selection of the language of common speech. What Wordsworth had preached, Whitman thoroughly put into practice. Whitman carefully avoided the stock poetic phrasing of his time and employed the racy language of the street-corner, including slang. To the novelty of his verse and diction, he added the novelty of his construction. Often logical enough in organisation, he tried to conceal this logic rather than to reveal it. He sought to suggest and provoke rather than to round out and finish, so that his poems often seem as bafflingly inconsequent as the essays of Emerson. Whitman's transcendental, nationalistic message, together with his vast portrayal of America, could hardly have been conveyed by the use of the neatly turned heroic couplet of Pope, or the rapid octosyllabic verse of Scott, or even the majestic organ-verse of Milton. That message demanded the medium of Whitman's own free and sonorous chants. However, as a stylist Whitman is almost as uneven as Wordsworth. Page after page of tiresome repetition and exclamation, page after page of undigested impressions, irritate us. Whitman's best passages are those in which the reader is not diverted from his thought by vagaries of style. In such passages, Whitman produces, through his own novel medium, the romantic overtones of a Shelley and the sonorous harmonies of a Milton.

The same contradictions which mark his personality are evident in his style. His work aims toward a simplification of speech, yet its homeliness is not always racy. Sometimes it is mere flat statement, sometimes it is a grotesque combination of the colloquial and the grandiose. Sometimes, indeed, it is corrupted by linguistic bad taste and ployglot phrasing as naively absurd as "the tangl'd long-deferr'd eclaircissement of human life"..."See my cantabile—you Libertad !" "Exalte...the mighty earth—eidolon"..."These from me, O Democracy to serve you, ma femme !" "No dainty dolce affetuoso I !"

Whitman's form was not as revolutionary as it seemed. Heine's "North Sea" cycles had been composed in free, unrhymed rhythms and the sonorous strophes of the Old Testament were Whitman's avowed model. Whitman was the first to object to the charge that his work had "the freedom of formlessness." He did not even admit its irregularity. None can deny the music in his poetry which is capable of the widest orchestral effects. It is a music accomplished in a dozen ways—by the Hebraic "balance" brought to perfection in Job and the Psalms by the long and extraordinarily flexible line suddenly whipped taut, by repetitions at the beginnings of lines and reiterations within the lines, by following his recitatives with a soaring aria. Thus, in the midst of the elaborate piling up in *Song of Myself* there are such sheer lyrical outburts as the passages beginning "Press close, bare-bosm'd night", "Smile, O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth", "The last scud of the day holds back for me", "A child said what is the grass ?" No counting of syllables, says a commentator, will reveal the mechanism of this music, but the music is there.

The free rhythms and bold rhetoric of *Leaves of Grass*, highly original as they are, doubtless owe something, to the King James translation of the Bible. They may owe something, also, to Macpherson's Ossianic poems, which were still popular in Whitman's youth.

As a technician, Whitman may be regarded as the father of free verse in American literature. He used rhyme rarely, as in the popular but uncharacteristic "O Captain ! My Captain !" Seeking a new poetic form to fit his new poetic content, he found models in operatic recitative, the English Bible, Shakespeare, and translations of Greek and Latin oratory. Also, he searched endlessly for fresh idiom and vocabulary, adopting words freely from other languages especially French. His poems were written to be spoken, and in rhythm and tonal volume there is a great dynamic range—from fierce declamation to the aria from "the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle."

"But if we compare Whitman with that very beautiful poet, Alfred Tennyson, the most skilful of all Whitman's contemporaries, we are at once aware of how limiting Tennyson's forms have been, of how much Tennyson has had to leave out, even in those discursive poems where he is trying to put everything in. Whitman's poems represent his world and himself much more satisfactorily than Tennyson's do his. In the past, few poets have both formed and represented each in the highest degree ; but in modern times what controlling, organising, selecting, poet has created a world with as much in it as Whitman's, a world that so plainly is the world ? Of all modern poets he has, quantitatively speaking, the most comprehensive soul—and, qualitatively, a most comprehensive and comprehending one, with charities and concessions and qualifications that are rare at any time."

"Whitman is more coordinate and parallel than anybody, is *the* poet of parallel present participle, of twenty verbs joined by a single subject. All this helps to give his work its feeling of raw hypnotic reality of being that world which also streams over us joined only by *ands*, until we supply the subordinating conjunctions; and since as children we see the *ands*, and not the *becauses*, this method helps to give Whitman some of the freshness of childhood. How inexhaustibly interesting the world is in Whitman !"

Actually his poems contained more conventional techniques, such as alliteration, assonance, personification, rhetorical patterns, and "poetic diction" than he realised. But he did not consciously use rhyme, metre, stanzas, refrains, and similar devices except in a few poems such as "O Captain ! My Captain !" and "Pioneers ! O Pioneers !" It is possible to say that his greatest achievement was in the realm of aesthetics. T. S. Eliot observed : "When Whitman speaks of the lilac or the mocking-bird his theories and beliefs drop away like a needless pretext." This is another way of saying that Whitman's importance as a poet is in his artistry, not in his didactic message.

Whitman sometimes used musical language to describe or to announce the voices in his poems. "Aria" and "recitative" became favourite words with him. The "aria" is the moment of great spiritual excitement expressed in words of rare lyric grace. A superb example of this is to be found in the bird's songs of *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* and *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd.* In the first poem, the mocking-bird sings three times to the listening boy, who learns of earthly happiness and earthly tragedy by becoming one with the bird. The most lengthy of the three arias is the lament, a despairing carol of frustrated love, sung against a background of the beach, the low-hanging moon, and the rising stars. The song communicates the bird's grief directly to the boy.

In the second poem, the poet hears the carol of the hermit thrush which is a hymn the beauty of death, the "dark mother", who brings love's fulfilment and final joy. The passage describing this song is characterised by a verbal melody created by the pattern of vowels, sibilants and liquid consonants.

Through Tennyson he discovered the beauty of verbal melody and the advantage of pictorial and dramatic art in poetry, and he acknowledged that the lack of these in his own poetry was perhaps a defect. His revolt against conformity gradually subsided. Many of his later poems—especially those written during and just following the Civil War—such as *Pioneers ! O Pioneers !* and *O Captain ! My Captain !* and *Ethiopio Saluting The Colours*—are quite regular in structure. He also discovered that there were objection to pure realism. The poet of the future, as he finally visualised him, must not merely reflect nature and the material, but absorb and spiritualise them; he must make "no useless attempt to repeat the material creations", but through imagination project and transcend them

So far American poetry has been purely imitative and trivial—a "copious dribble" of piano songs and tinkling rhymes. Let the poet of the future beware of too much refinement and conformity and trust to his instinct : nature looks on all "fixed-up poetry and art as something almost impermanent." Whitman's formula for style is to have no style and the sum and substance of his a esthetic theory is, "Be natural, Be natural, Be natural !" He would break down the barriers of form between prose and poetry and restrict the use of rhyme and metre to comic verse. Yet his verse is as different from ordinary prose as from ordinary poetry. His unit of rhythm is the phrase instead of the foot, and his unit of thought is the line instead of the sentence. The most notable features of his verse are repetition, parallelism, and a high rhetorical tone.

19

"Democratic Vistas"

A journalist described Whitman as the most potent force in shaping the ideas of democracy of the period. In his own journalistic writings, Whitman showed himself to be a radical democrat. He advocated equal rights, direct popular vote, and abolition of monopolies and special privileges. He also advocated free trade, universal sufferage, prison reform, women's rights, etc. He was opposed to temperance laws, economic monopolies, political corruption, exploitation of workers and other evils.

He had no consistent, logically constructed political philosophy and only followed his democratic instincts. He based his philosophy or faith on universal human sympathy, and on the ever-widening freedom of the masses of men. This universality was his "grand theme" and in it he rooted his democratic outlook.

The fullest expression of this philosophy was given in *Democratic Vistas*, a pamphlet he wrote in 1871. The pamphlet is a remarkable testament to the philosophy of freedom. It is a stirring document of faith in humanity. His utterances in it ring with affirmation of life's triumphs. It has a remarkable power to stretch the human mind and enlarge the human horizon. It is, indeed, a major contribution to the world's literature of democracy. In it Whitman elaborates three chief points : first, he warns the nation against the prevailing cynicism, materialism, and corruption. Secondly, he underlines the greatness of America's destiny as a land of democracy, an empire of freedom to serve as a model for mankind. Finally, he develops the concept of democracy as a personal not a governmental or political, ideal.

According to Whitman, democracy is not to be defined as majority rule which may become tyrannical : it is the possibility of individual self-development, in which body, mind, and soul all proceed toward spiritual ends without loss of the material functions of living. Only a government which provides for the free functioning of every individual in every way necessary for complete being can be regarded as democratic, and such a government must rest ultimately upon the fraternity of comrades. Only such a government can meet and survive the difficulties of a new age in which Nature has become the servant of man and can be used either to elevate or to destroy. Whitman gives a realistic account of the diseases of American democracy which he says, take centuries to mature.

Democratic Vistas is Walt Whitman's only major prose work. It is one of the truest and most moving of all statements of the theory of democracy, as it had been known and believed in the United States. Whitman accepts the basic faith of Jefferson that all men are good and that the best society is the one of the least government because it permits the greatest progress toward human perfection. American democracy, he says, has fallen upon evil days through the schism of war and the corruption of government. Here, for the first time, the poet admits the discrepancy between the ideal and the actual ; but only to enforce the ideal. With a democratic literature to guide it, and with the advances in knowledge of modern science, the grand experiment in the growth of individuals can yet succeed.

In his criticism of post-Civil War America, Whitman was very bitter. The nation, he wrote, had "just by a hair escaped destruction", and now it was wallowing in ugliness, "plentiful meanness and vulgarity", and universal corruption. State and federal legislatures were openly bought ; politicians were the creatures of the moneyed men, especially the railroad magnates. Outright or concealed bribery of politicians, of soldiers and members of the press was only one manifestation of the universal moral degeneration that Whitman found in American life at the time he was writing *Democratic Vistas*. He viewed the national scene "like a physician diagnosing some deep disease" after the "agony and bloody sweat" of the Civil War, and found it appalling. In *Democratic Vistas*, he writes :

"The official services of America, national, state, and municipal, in all their branches and departments, except the judiciary, are saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, maladministration ; and the judiciary is tainted. The great critics reek with respectable as much as non-respectable robbery and scounderlism...Everywhere, in shop, street, church, theatre, bar-room, official chair, are pervading flippancy and vulgarity, low cunning, infidelity'......"

Whitman referred to his democratic philosophy as "personalism". By it he meant the inner development of man to achieve his highest potential, rejecting personal greed and "hoggish materialism", fulfilling himself in all his talents and aspirations as a moral member of society. To achieve this, it was necessary to reconsider the functions of government. The object of government was to give opportunity to ordinary human beings to grow in all dimensions—"to develop, to open up to cultivation, to encourage the possibilities of all beneficent and manly outcroppage, and...the pride and self-respect latent in all characters." Such a democratic government was to be a "training-school for making first-class men."

Whitman conceived of democracy as a unique form of civilisation that, transcending ordinary politics and material strivings should have for its sole aim the creation of a noble race of human beings, unlike any others known in the past. Such were the dazzling vistas that the poet of democracy opened up for America, and beyond.

Democratic Vistas is Whitman's greatest prose piece in which he makes some of his most important pronouncements about democracy. One such pronouncement is as follows : "It (democracy) is the old, yet ever-modern dream of earth, out of her eldest and her youngest, her fond philosophers and poets. Not that half, only, individualism, which isolates. There is another half, which is adhesiveness or love, that fuses, ties, and aggregates, making the race comrades, and fraternising all. Both are to be vitalised by religion."

In another passage in *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman returns to this fundamental concept of his democratic ideal; "Intense and loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man to man—which, hard to define, underlies the lessons and ideals of the profound saviours of every land and age, and which seems to promise when thoroughly developed, cultivated and recognised in manners and literature, the most substantial hope and safety of the future of these States, will then be fully expressed." In a foot-note to this passage, Whitman distinguishes adhesiveness from "amativeness". It is to the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship, (the adhesive love, at least rivalling the amative love hitherto possessing imaginative literature, if not going beyond it) that I look for the counterbalance and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualisation thereof." The remainder of this foot-note describes the "manly friendship" as "fond and loving, pure and sweet, strong and life-long." On the one hand, adhesiveness merges particular individuals in a deeply personal, yet purely spiritual, attachment ; on the other hand, a multitude of such attachments interpenetrating and bindings a nation creates a democratic State rooted deeply in genuinely moral human character rather than in convention or law.

Democratic Vistas is in a certain sense unrepresentative of its author. For it seeks to be a treatise and Whitman had no gift for ordering ideas. It is of the greatest interest because of what it manages to convey. It is a powerful indictment of the shortcomings of American democracy in Whitman's time, as well as an eloquent reminder of what democracy at its best is supposed to mean, and for this reason it will always occupy a position near the centre of his work.

20

Song of Myself

(First published in 1855)

I. TEXT

1

I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents, born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.

2

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes,
I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation it is odorless,
It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs,
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark color'd sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,

The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind,
A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms,
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag,
The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hill-sides,
The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun.

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much ? have you reckon'd the earth much ?

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read ?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems ?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left).

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me.

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.

3

I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

Urge and urge and urge.
Always the procreant urge of the world.
Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always substance and increase, always sex,
Always a knit of identity, always distinction, always a breed of life.

To elaborate is no avail, learn'd and unlearn'd feel that it is so.

Sure as the most certain sure, plumb in the uprights, well entretied, braced in the beams,
Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,
I and this mystery here we stand.

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.

Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn.

Showing the best and dividing it from the worst age vexes age,
Knowing the perfect fitness and equanimity of things, while they discuss I am silent, and go bathe and admire myself.

Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean, Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest.

I am satisfied—I see, dance, laugh, sing ;
As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night, and withdraws at the peep of the day with stealthy tread,
Leaving me baskets cover'd with white towels swelling the house with their plenty,
Shall I postpone my acceptation and realization and scream at my eyes,
That they turn from gazing after and down the road,
And forthwith cipher and show to me a cent,
Exactly the value of one and exactly the value of two, and which is ahead ?

5

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other.

Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.
I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
How you settle your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet,
Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love,
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder, mullein and poke-weed.

6

A child said *What is the grass* ? fetching it to me with full hands ;
How could I answer the child ? I do not know what it is any more than he,
I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven :
Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord.

A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say *Whose* ?

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Strouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.
Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their mothers' laps,

And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men ?
And what do you think has become of the women and children ?
They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.
All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

7

Has any one supposed it lucky to be born ?
I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it.

I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe, and am not contain'd between my hat and boots,
And persue manifold objects, no two alike and every one good,
The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good.

I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,
I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself,

(They do not know how immortal, but I know.)
Every kind for itself and its own, for me mine male and female,
For me those that have been boys and that love women,
For me the man that is proud and feels how it stings to be slighted,
For me the sweet-heart and the old maid, for me mothers and the mothers of mothers,
For me lips that have smiled, eyes that have shed tears,
For me children and the begetters of children.
Undrape ! you are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded,
I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no,
And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless, and cannot be shaken away.

11

Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
Twenty-eight young men and all so friendly ;
Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome.
She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,
She hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window.
Which of the young men does she like the best ?
Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.
Where are you off to, lady ? for I see you,
You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room.
Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather,
The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.
The beard of the young men glisten'd with wet, it ran from their long hair,
Little streams pass'd all over their bodies.
An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,
It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.
The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge to the sun, they do not ask who seizes fast to them,
They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray.

21

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.
I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be man,
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.
I chant the chant of dilation or pride,

We have had ducking and deprecating about enough,
I show that size is only development.

Have you outstript the rest ? are you the President ?
It is a trifle, they will more than arrive there everyone, and still pass on

I am he that walks with the tender and growing night,
I call to the earth and sea half-held by the night.

Press close bare-bosom'd night—press close magnetic nourishing night !

Night of south winds—night of the large few stars !
Still nodding night—mad naked summer night.

Smile O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth !
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees !
Earth of departed sunset—earth of the mountains misty-topt !
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue !
Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river !
Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake !

Far-swooping elbow'd earth—rich apple-blossm'd earth !
Smile, for your lover comes.

Prodigal, you have given me love—therefore I to you give love !
O unspeakable passionate love.

23

Endless unfolding of words of ages !
And mine a word of the modern, the word En-Masse.

A word of the faith that never balks,
Here or henceforward it is all the same to me, I accept Time absolutely.

It alone is without flaw, it alone rounds and completes all,
That mystic baffling wonder alone completes all.

I accept Reality and dare not question it,
Materialism first and last imbuing.

Hurrah for positive science ! long live exact demonstration !
Fetch stonecrop mixt with cedar and branches of lilac,
This is the lexicographer, this the chemist, this made a grammar of the old cartouches,
These mariners put the ship through dangerous unknown seas,
This is the geologist, this works with the scalpel, and this is a mathematician.

Gentlemen, to you the first honors always !
Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling,
I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling.

Less the reminders of properties told my words,
And more the reminders they of life untold, and of freedom and extrication,
And make short account of neuters and geldings, and favour men and women fully equipt,

And beat the gong of revolt, and stop with fugitives and them that
plot and conspire.

24

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from
them,
No more modest than immodest.

Unscrew the locks from the doors !
Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs !
Whoever degrades another degrades me,
And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.

Through me the afflatus surging and surging, through me the current
and index.

I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
By God ! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart
of on the same terms.

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
Voices of the diseas'd and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
And of the threads that connect the stars, and of wombs and of the
father-stuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
Of the deform'd, trivail, flat, foolish, despised,
Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung.

Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.

I do not press my fingers across my mouth,
I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart,
Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is
a miracle.

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever
I touch or am touch'd from,
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.

If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of
my own body, or any part of it,
Translucent mould of me it shall be you !
Shaded ledges and rests it shall be you !
Firm masculine colter it shall be you !
Whatever goes to the tilth of me it shall be you !
You my rich blood ! your milky stream pale strippings of my
life !

Breast that presses against other breasts it shall be you !
My brain it shall be your occult convolutions !

Root of wash'd sweet-flag ! timorous pond-snipe ! nest of guarded duplicate eggs ! it shall be you !

Mix'd trussled hay of head, beard, brawn, it shall be you !
Trickling sap of maple, fibre of manly wheat, it shall be you !
Sun so generous it shall be you !
Vapors lighting and shading my face it shall be you !
You sweaty brooks and dews it shall be you !
Winds whose soft-trickling genitals rub against me it shall be you !
Broad muscular fields, branches of live oak, loving lounger in my winding paths, it shall be you !

Hands I have taken, face I have kiss'd, mortal I have ever touch'd, it shall be you.

I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and all so luscious,
Each moment and whatever happens thrills me with joy,
I cannot tell how my ankles bend, nor whence the cause of my faintest wish,
Nor the cause of the friendship I emit, nor the cause of the friendship I take again.

That I walk up my stoop, I pause to consider if it really be,
A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books.

To behold the day-break !
The little light fades the immense and diaphanous shadows,
The air tastes good to my palate.

Hefts of the moving world at innocent gambols silently rising, freshly exuding,
Scooting obliquely high and low.

Something I cannot see puts upward libidinous prongs,
Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven.

The earth by the sky staid with, the daily close of their junction,
The heav'd challenge from the east that moment over my head,
The mocking taunt, See then whether you shall be master !

25

Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would kill me,
If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me.

We also ascend dazzling and tremendous as the sun,
We found our own O my soul in the calm and cool of the day-break.

My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach,
With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds.

Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself,
It provokes me forever, it says sarcastically,
Walt you contain enough, why don't you let it out then ?

Come now I will not be tantalized, you conceive too much of
articulation,
Do you not know O speech how the buds beneath you are folded ?
Waiting in gloom, protected by frost,
The dirt receding before my prophetical screams,
I underlying causes to balance them at last,
My knowledge my live parts, it keeping tally with the meaning of all
things,
Happiness, (which whoever hears me let him or her set out in search
of this day.)
My final merit I refuse you, I refuse putting from me what I really
am,
Encompass worlds, but never try to encompass me,
I crowd your sleekest and best by simply looking toward you.
Writing and talk do not prove me,
I carry the plenum of proof and everything else in my face,
With the hush of lips I wholly confound the skeptic.

27

To be in any form, what is that ?
(Round and round we go, all of us, and ever come back thither,)
If nothing lay more develop'd the quahaug in its callous shell were
enough.
Mine is no callous shell,
I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,
They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me
I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy,
To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can
stand.

28

Is this then a touch ? quivering me to a new identity,
Flames and ether making a rush for my veins,
Treacherous tip of me reaching and crowding to help them,
My flesh and blood playing out lightning to strike what is hardly
different from myself,
On all sides prurient provokers stiffening my limbs,
Straining the udder of my heart for its withheld drip,
Behaving licentious toward me, taking no denial,
Depriving me of my best as for a purpose,
Unbuttoning my clothes, holding me by the bare waist,
Deluding my confusion with the calm of the sunlight and pasture-
fields,
Immodestly sliding the fellow-senses away,
They bribed to swap off with touch and go and graze at the edges
of me,
No consideration, no regard for my draining strength or my
anger,

Fetching the rest of the herd around to enjoy them a while,
Then all uniting to stand on a headland and worry me.

The sentries desert every other part of me,
They have left me helpless to a red marauder,
They all come to the headland to witness and assist against me.

I am given up by traitors,
I talk wildly, I have lost my wits, I and nobody else am the greatest traitor,
I went myself first to the headland, my own hands carried me there,
You villain touch ! what are you doing ? my breath is tight in its throat,
Unclench your floodgates, you are too much for me.

32

I think I could turn, and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain'd,
I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

So they show their relations to me and I accept them,
They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their possession.

I wonder where they get those tokens,
Did I pass that way huge times ago and negligently drop them ?
Myself moving forward then and now and forever,
Gathering and showing more always and with velocity,
Infinite and omnigenous, and the like of these among them,
Not too exclusive toward the reachers of my remembrancers,
Picking out here one that I love, and now go with him on brotherly terms.

A gigantic beauty of a stallion, fresh and responsive to my caresses,
Head high in the forehead, wide between the ears,
Limbs glossy and supple, tail dusting the ground,
Eyes full of sparkling wickedness, ears finely cut, flexibly moving.

His nostrils dilate as my heels embrace him,
His well-built limbs tremble with pleasure as we race around and return.

I but use you a minute, then I resign you, stallion,
Why do I need your paces when I myself out-gallop them ?
Even as I stand or sit passing faster than you.

50

There is that in me—I do not know what it is—but I know it is in me.
Wrench'd and sweaty—calm and cool then my body becomes,
I sleep—I sleep long.

I do not know it—it is without name—it is a word unsaid,
It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol.

Something it swings on more than the earth I swing on,
To it the creation is the friend whose embracing awakes me.

Perhaps I might tell more. Outlines ! I plead for my brothers and sisters.

Do you see O my brothers and sisters ?
It is not chaos or death—it is form, union plan—it is eternal life—it is Happiness.

51

The past and present wilt—I have fill'd them, emptied them,
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Listener up there ! what have you to confide to me ?
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,
(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer)

Do I contradict myself ?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the door-slab.

Who has done his day's work ? who will soonest be through with his supper ?

Who wishes to walk with me ?
Will you speak before I am gone ? will you prove already too late ?

52

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me,
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,

And filter and fibre your blood.
Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Section 1. ("I celebrate myself")

The very opening lines show the poet's egotism which persists throughout his work. The "I" used throughout *Song of Myself* has a double significance. Firstly, it applies to Walt Whitman, the individual. Secondly, it has a universal application. In this second sense we are to believe in an imaginative and sympathetic identification of Walt Whitman with every other individual self or with his conception of what other individual selves should be like. It has also been suggested that the universal aspect of "I" refers to a mystical union of Walt Whitman with God, the Absolute Self. However, the universal aspect of "I" should not make us forget even for a moment Whitman's acute consciousness of his own identity and of the separateness of his identity.

In the first two lines, the very height of egotism is reached when the poet says that he celebrates himself and that the reader shall assume what the poet assumes.

The poet then invites his soul to loaf with him as he, leaning at his ease, observes a spear of summer grass. He refers to the soil where he was born thirty-seven years ago. He is in perfect health and hopes to remain active till death. He proposes to keep creeds and schools (that is, second-hand knowledge) in abeyance. He will permit Nature to speak "at every hazard, without check and with original energy."

Section 2. ("Houses and rooms are full of perfumes...")

The poet expresses a desire to identify himself with Nature or what he calls the "atmosphere." He is not interested in the perfumes which crowed the shelves in houses and rooms. He would rather go into the woods in order to establish a contact, a physical contact, with the "atmosphere" with which he is in love. It has been suggested that the "perfumes" and the "fragrance" here symbolise other individual selves from whose influence the poet would like to keep himself free. According to this suggestion, the poet escapes from the individual to the universal which is symbolised by the atmosphere.

The poet's zest for life is clearly perceptible here, though in this Section it is a zest for an intimate physical relationship with a natural environment.

We are given a brief catalogue of miscellaneous things and experiences which interest the poet—the smoke of his own breath, echoes, buzz'd whispers, his respiration and the beating of his heart, the smell of green leaves and dry leaves, the sound of his voice, etc. We have here what we may call a rush of vivid imagery.

One of the most sensuous and suggestive pictures is contained in he following line : "A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms." Another beautiful picture is contained in this line : "The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag." The poet's optimism and his zest for life are clearly seen here. The poet speaks of his delight in solitude, his delight in the rush of the streets, and his delight along the fields and hillsides. He speaks also of his feeling of health and the song in his head when he rises from his bed and sees the sun.

The poet disapproves of our learning things at second or third hand or looking at things through the eyes of those who described their experiences and philosophies in their books and who are no more in this world. He would not like us even to look at things through his eyes or to accept his world. He wants us to have a personal knowledge of things and to form our own opinions about them. He scoffs at a man feeling proud of having got "at the meaning of poem" without understanding the origin of poems.

Section 3. ("I have heard what the talkers were talking")

The poet is not interested in the talk of the beginning or the end. He is interested in the immediate present because the beginning lies in the present and because there is no more heaven or hell than there is **now**.

He then speaks of the urge, "the procreant urge of the world." The unlearned as well as the learned understand that sex breeds life. The poet stands face to face with this mystery.

Everything in the world is clear and sweet. The existence of the unseen is proved by the existence of what we can see. The poet perceives "the perfect fitness and equanimity of things". While others are talking (of the beginning and the end,) the poet would go and bathe and admire his naked body. He praises every organ and attribute of himself and of all other men who are "hearty and clean". Not a single particle of the human body is vile. The poet delights in a complete familiarity with every inch of his body.

The poet's love for the human body is noteworthy. His optimism is here emphasised : "I am satisfied—I see, dance, laugh, sing."

We have here an oblique reference to a secret sex relationship (perhaps lasting only for a night) :

> As the hugging and loving Bed-fellow sleeps at my side
> through the night, and withdraws at the peep of the
> day with stealthy tread.

But this has also been regarded as having a mystical significance. The "loving Bed-fellow" may be God. The poet asks if he should postpone the acceptance and realisation of the gifts of Providence until he has calculated and assessed their exact value. His answer to this question, though not stated, is obvious.

Section 5. **("I believe in you, my Soul")**

In the two opening lines of this Section, the poet seems to say that he treats the body and the soul on an equal footing and that neither of them is to be subordinated to the other. He would like to loaf on the grass in the company of his soul. He recalls the time when one morning he lay on the grass, with his soul wooing and making love to him as a woman might :

> How you settled your head athwart my hips, and gently turn'd over upon me,
> And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart..............

The imagery here has physical connotations, but the meaning is essentially spiritual. The poet seems to be speaking of the close relationship between the body and the soul.

This Section contains some of the most famous lines in *Song of Myself.*

> And I know that the hand of the God is the promise of my own,
> And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own ;
> And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers ;
> And that a kelson of the creation is love ;

Here speaks the poet of democracy and an ardent believer in God.

Throughout Sections 1-5, the senses have been defiantly accepted and even celebrated, with the suggestion that they are to have a significant part in the approaching union of the soul with God. Whereas normally the mystical state is achieved only through a mortification of, or escape from, the senses, the poet here proposes to reach mystical consciousness through the transfigured senses. In Section 5, the poet's sudden realization that the hand of God is the promise of his own and that the spirit of God is the brother of his own is the mystic's awakening to a consciousness of Divine Reality.

Section 6. **("A child said, What is the grass ?")**

The poet does not understand exactly what grass is just as a child does not understand what it means. However, the poet indulges in a bit of guess-work and finds several possible interpretations of the significance of grass :

(*i*) Perhaps the grass is the flag of the poet's disposition. This meant that the grass is a symbol of the poet's nature and temperament, its greenness being indicative of the poet's hopeful attitude towards life.

(*ii*) Perhaps the grass is the handkerchief of God, a perfumed reminder of the existence of God.

(*iii*) Perhaps the grass is itself a child, a child of the vegetation.

(*iv*) Perhaps the grass is a uniform symbol ("hieroglyphic") of all the peoples and races of the world, because it grows in all regions of the globe.

Then the grass acquires a new significance : it seems to the poet to be "the beautiful uncut hair of graves." The poet promises to treat the grass tenderly because it might have sprung from the breasts of young men, or from old people, and women, and from babes.

The poet then passes on to the theme of immortality. He asks what has become of the men, women, and children who are no more in this world. His answer is that they are "alive and well somewhere." There is no such thing as death : "The smallest sprout shows there is really no death." If there is any such thing as death, it does not mean the end of life but a continuance of life.

The importance of this Section lies in (*a*) the different meanings which the poet discovers in such an ordinary thing as the grass : and (*b*) in the poet's firm belief in immortality : "All goes onward and outward—nothing collapses."

The grass becomes, in this important Section, a key to the ultimate enigma of Divine Reality.

Section 7. ("Has any one supposed it lucky to be born ?")

If it is lucky to be born, it is equally lucky to die (because, as stated in the preceding Section, death does not mean the end of life).

The poet shows his interest in all things that he sees on the earth, and he finds "good" in everything that he sees. No two objects on this earth are alike, and each object has a goodness of its own—"The earth good, and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good."

The poet is the mate and companion of people, who are immortal like himself. He feels interested in those who have been boys, and who love women. He is interested in the man who is proud and who feels hurt by insult. He is interested in the sweetheart, the old maid, the mother, and the mother of mothers. He is interested in smiles and in tears. He is not repelled by those who are thought guilty or stale, nor by those who have been discarded by society.

In this Section we see (*a*) the poet's faith in immortality ; (*b*) his belief in the goodness of all things ; and (*c*) his all embracing interest in mankind.

It is the optimistic and mystical poet of democracy who speaks here as in many other Sections of the poem.

In this Section there is a probing of the self, an attempt to express what the self really is. The poet is "not contained between his hat and boots, nor is he "an adjunct of an earth."

Section 11. ("Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore")

The surface meaning of this Section is quite clear. Twenty-eight young men, "all so friendly", are bathing in the sea. A beautiful and lonely woman, twenty-eight years of age, sees them bathing from the fine house in which she dwells. All the young men, even the homeliest of them, attract her attention. In her imagination she joins them and, again in her imagination, she passes her hand over the bodies of the young men. The young men are not aware of the desire they have aroused in the heart of this unknown and unseen woman.

Thus regarded, the poem is simple enough. It is a sensuous picture of the sexual longing that a number of young men unknowingly arouse in a woman who sees them from a distance but who is not seen by them.

But critics have tried to find a hidden significance in this Section. The poem is a kind of riddle. Why the number twenty-eight ? It is not known if this number has any occult significance. Not only is the number of young men twenty-eight, but the woman is also twenty-eight years old. According to an Indian scholar,[1] who quotes Vishnu Purana, human beings suffer from twenty-eight kinds of imperfections or disabilities—defects of intellect, discontent, ignorance and the like. Man, by reason of these twenty-eight imperfections, is unable to see or know the soul. The handsome and richly dressed woman in the poem represents the soul. The woman's going and bathing in the company of the twenty-eight young men means the soul seeing the twenty-eight imperfections and playing with them, itself remaining unseen and unknown. The sea is the symbol of the phenomenal world-process, and its cycles of birth and death.

The same scholar makes another suggestion. The woman in the poem is the twenty-ninth bather. "Twenty-nine perhaps refers to the year of Whitman's life, the climacteric year, when he gained, as if by a miracle, the transcendent vision which transformed him. Twenty-eight years he had spent in ignorance without a knowledge of his soul ; now in the twenty-ninth he realised his true self which had remained hidden all along."

Another way of looking at this Section is to regard it as a picture of loneliness and isolation. It is a picture of a young woman, whose life has been "all so lonesome", secretly observing longing for, and imaginatively joining the twenty-eight young swimmers.

Section 21. ("I am the poet of body")

The poet defines himself as the poet of the body and the poet of the soul. A similar idea was expressed in Section 5, where the poet said :

> I believe in you, my Soul—the other I am must not abase itself to you ;
> And you must not be abased to the other.

In other words, the body and the soul are equally important to the poet. He is not the kind of poet who denigrates the body in order to exalt the soul.

The world offers both the pleasures of heaven and the pains of

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1. O. K. Nambiar

hell. The poet tries to enhance the pleasures which the world offers, and tries to belittle its miseries.

Woman is as important to the poet as man. Woman is as great as man. Nay, she is greater than man, because she is the mother of man.

Having expressed these ideas, the poet goes on to express his delight in the earth and all its sights. He gives us a series of sensuous pictures of the treasures that earth offers to him. The slumbering and liquid trees, sunset, for-covered mountains, the full moon, bright and clear clouds, apple-blossoms—such are the fascinating sights that the earth offers and that the poet loves. He is the lover of the earth to which he offers his love, unspeakable, passionate love.

The sensuous imagery of the poem, the writer's passionate love of all that he sees on the earth, and his optimistic attitude of life.

The poet proposes, through self, to increase "the pleasures of heaven" (the spiritual), and to "translate into a new tongue" (that is, to transfigure or to purify) the "pains of the hell" (the physical).

Section 23. ("Endless unfolding of words of ages !")

Endless words have been used through the ages. But the poet emphasises the importance of the modern world "En-Masse." The poet thus declares his faith in common humanity and speaks as the singer of democracy.

The poet accepts "time" because time alone is without flaw. Time rounds and completes all.

The poet accepts reality and materialism. He welcomes science, geology, mathematics, chemistry, etc. He honours the scientists because their discoveries are useful and real.

But the poet's domain is different. He would like to speak of the untold life, of freedom, of men and women. The poet would lead a revolt (again conservatism and orthodoxy). In the last line of this Section, Whitman appears a rebel).

The poet enthusiastically, accepts materialism symbolised by "positive science", but he by no means considers it final. Acceptance of the body would necessarily entail the acceptance of the physical world, or materialism ; but just as the body offers the way into the mystical state, so positive science offers the way to something other than itself, to "life untold."

Section 24. ("Walt Whitman am I, a kosmos, of mighty Manhattan the son").

This is an important Section which provides ample evidence of the temperament and personality of Walt Whitman. It is a highly autobiographical Section which contains a revealing self-analysis of the poet. He calls himself "turbulent, fleshy, and sensual." He is a true democrat because he will "accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms." Through him will speak many voices which have been dumb for long—voices of slaves, of prostitutes of deformed and diseased persons, of thieves and dwarfs. Through him will speak forbidden voices—those of sex and lust. The sex-act is not foul in his eyes, just as death is not foul. He is a believer in the flesh and the appetites of the flesh. He looks upon his body and his organs as miracles. He considers himself divine and he considers his head or mind to be "more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds". He is a worshipper of his body. He dotes on himself, and each moment thrills him with joy :

> I dote on myself—there is that lot of me, and all so luscious ;
> Each moment, and whatever happens, thrills me with joy
> O I am wonderful !

These lines do not merely represent an egotistical self-glorification, because "I" has a universal aspect also in *Song of Myself*.

Section 25. **("Dazzling and tremendous, how quick...")**

The poet radiates bright light even as the sun does. He and his soul "ascend dazzling and tremendous as the sun."

With his power of speech he can enfold whole worlds. His power of speech provokes him by challenging him to express all that is within him, but he would not accept the challenge. He believes happiness and in silence. Writing and talk are irrelevant because he can completely confound the skeptic with his silence. He carries on his face the full proof of what he contains.

The tremendous self-conceit of the poet is to be noted here. He compares himself to sun-rise and claims that he can encompass worlds with the "twirl" of his tongue.

Section 27. **("To be, in any form, what is that?")**

In this brief Section the poet expresses his extreme sensitivity to all objects in the world and to all impressions. He does not live in an imprisoning, confining shell. He is alive and responsive to everything in the world. He declares that he has "instant conductors" all over his body so that the very proximity of things sends sensations through his body. It makes him happy to feel the existence of things with his fingers. The physical touch of a human being is a tremendous experience for him.

Section 28. **("Is this then a touch ? quivering me to a new Identity !")**

In this section the poet glorifies the physical contact between human beings. The touch of another human being gives to the poet a new identity. He feels as if flames and ether (that is, heat and cold) have run into his veins when he is touched by another human being.

The poet speaks of his reaction to the touch of another human being in language that is charged with intense sensuality—"prurient provokers" ; "behaving licentious toward me" ; "unbuttoning my clothes" ; "immodestly sliding the fellow-senses away" ; etc. The poet feels utterly helpless in the face of the sensations that surge through his body when he is touched. Speaking in a tone of desperation, therefore, he says :

> You villa in touch ! what are you doing ? My breath is
> tight in its throat ;
>
> Unclench your flood-gates ! you are too much for me.

Section 32. ("I think I could turn and live with animals...")

The first eight lines of this Section have become famous and are often quoted. The poet describes the simplicity, innocence, and contentment of the life of animals. The animals lead a far happier life than human beings because they do not sweat, they do not grumble about their conditions of life, they are not tormented by a sense of guilt, they do not discuss their duty to God, they are not dissatisfied, they are not crazy about worldly possessions, they do not cringe to their kind, and they do not have to labour and toil. There is something in the poet that corresponds to the nature of animals : "They bring me tokens of myself.

In his imagination the poet picks out one of the animals, a stallion, and goes with it "on brotherly terms." The size, beauty, suppleness, and well-built limbs of the stallion, which is responsive to the poet's caresses, are described vividly in six remarkable lines at the end of which the poet declares that he does not, after all, need the stallion because he can out-gallop its paces.

"In the animals exist all the traits the poet has attempted, in Sections 17-32, to ennoble and celebrate, traits frequently considered evil. It is this sense of evil that the poet has purged in the purification of self. These traits are now so much the poet's own that he wonders where the animals got them : " Did I pass that way huge times ago and negligently drop them ? Man, in the primitive state of evolution, had such traits but, in the development of his civilization, lost them to the animals."

Section 54. ("There is that in me—")

The poet here speaks of something indefinable in personality. The awareness of that something brings him composure even though he may have been feeling agitated and distressed before. He cannot find a name for that something which is in him.

The poet looks upon all mankind as his brothers and sisters. The essence of the universe in his eyes is not chaos or death. There is a plan behind this universe. This universe offers an eternal life and it offers happiness.

This Section, again, embodies the democratic outlook of the poet and, at the same time, gives expression to his optimistic view of life.

Section 51. ("The past and present wilt—")

The poet looks hopefully toward the future. He asks an imaginary listeners if he has something to confide to the poet. Let this listener speak to him honestly or frankly.

In lines that are often quoted, Whitman declares his right to contradict himself because he embodies the viewpoints of multitudes of people :

> Do I contradict myself ?
> Very well, then, I contradict myself ;
> (I am large—I contain multitudes.)

Contradicting oneself is not a fault because one may look at life differently at different times.

The poet then invites those who have completed their work to walk with him and talk with him before it is too late.

Section 52. ("The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me—")

The poet here imagines that the spotted hawk accuses him of talking too much and of loitering about aimlessly. Actually this is a piece of self-accusation. Like the hawk, the poet is untamed. He gives expression to his thoughts and feelings through his "barbaric yawp" which is untranslatable.

In a rare burst of humility, the poet says that he bequeathes himself to the dirt, in order to grow from the grass which he loves, adding : If you want me again, look for me under your boot-soles." Addressing the reader or the imaginary listener, the poet promises to be "good health" to him and says :

> Missing me one place, search another ;
> I stop somewhere, waiting for you.

The poem (*Song of Myself*) which began with "I" ends with "you".

21

The Sleepers

(First published in 1855)

I. TEXT

1

I WANDER all night in my vision,
Stepping with light feet, swiftly and noiselessly stepping and stopping.
Bending with open eyes over the shut eyes of sleepers,
Wandering and confused, lost to myself, ill-assorted, contradictory.
Pausing, gazing, pending, and stepping
How solemn they look there, stretch'd and still,
How quiet they breathe, the little children in their cradles.
The wretched features of ennuyes, the white features of corpses, the livid faces of drunkards, the sick-gray faces of onanists,
The gash'd bodies on battle-fields, the insane in their strong-door'd rooms, the sacred idiots, the new-born emerging from gates, and the dying emerging from gates,
The night pervades them and infolds them.
The married couple sleep calmly in their bed, he with his palm on the hip of the wife, and she with her palm on the hip of the husband,
The sisters sleep lovingly side by side in their bed,
The men sleep lovingly side by side in theirs,
And the mother sleeps with her little child carefully wrapt.
The blind sleep, and the deaf and dumb sleep.
The prisoner sleeps well in the prison, the runaway son sleeps,
The murderer that is to be hung next day, how does he sleep ?
And the murder'd person, how does he sleep ?
The female that loves unrequited sleeps,
And the male that loves unrequited sleeps,
The head of the money-maker that plotted all day sleeps,
And the enraged and treacherous dispositions, all, all sleep.
I stand in the dark with drooping eyes by the worst-suffering and the most restless,
I pass my hands soothingly to and fro a few inches from them,
The restless sink in their beds, they fitfully sleep.
Now I pierce the darkness, new beings appear,

The earth recedes from me into the night,
I saw that it was beautiful, and I see that what is not the earth is beautiful.

I go from bedside to bedside, I sleep close with the other sleepers each in turn,
I dream in my dream all the dreams of the other dreamers,
And I become the other dreamers.

I am a dance—play up there ! the fit is whirling me fast !
I am the ever-laughing—it is new moon and twilight,
I see the hiding of douceurs, I see nimble ghosts whichever way I look,
Cache and cache again deep in the ground and sea, and where it is neither ground nor sea.

Well do they do their jobs those journeymen divine,
Only from me can they hide nothing, and would not if they could.
I reckon I am their boss and they make me a pet besides.

And surround me and lead me and run ahead when I walk,
To lift their cunning covers to signify me with stretch'd arms, and resume the way ;

Onward we move, a gay gang of blackguards ! with mirth-shouting music and wild-flapping pennants of joy !

I am the actor, the actress, the voter,the politician,
The emigrant and the exile, the criminal that stood in the box,
He who has been famous and he who shall be famous after to-day,
The stammerer, the well-form'd person, the wasted or feeble person.

I am she who adorn'd herself and folded her hair expectantly,
My truant lover has come, and it is dark.

Double yourself and receive me darkness.

Receive me and my lover too, he will not let me go without him.

I roll myself upon you as upon a bed, I resign myself to the dusk.

He whom I call answers me and takes the place of my lover,
He rises with me silently from the bed.

Darkness, you are gentler than my lover, his flesh was sweaty and panting.

I feel the hot moisture yet that he left me.

My hands are spread forth, I pass them in all directions,
I would sound up the shadowy shore to which you are journeying.

Be careful darkness ! already what was it touch'd me ?

I thought my lover had gone, else darkness and he are one,
I hear the heart-beat, I follow, I fade away.

2

I descend my western course, my sinews are flaccid,
Perfume and youth course through me and I am their wake.

It is my face yellow and wrinkled instead of the old woman's,
I sit low in a straw-bottom chair and carefully darn my grandson's stockings.

It is I too, the sleepless widow looking out on the winter midnight,
I see the sparkles of starshine on the icy and pallid earth.
A shroud, I see and I am the shroud, I wrap a body and lie in the coffin,
It is dark here under ground, it is not evil or pain here, it is blank here, for reasons.
(It seems to me that every thing in the light and air ought to be happy,
Whoever is not in his coffin and the dark grave let him know he has enough.)

3

I see a beautiful gigantic swimmer swimming naked through the eddies of the sea,
His brown hair lies close and even to his head, he strikes out with courageous arms, he urges himself with his legs,
I see his white body, I see his undaunted eyes,
I hate the swift-running eddies that would dash him head-foremost on the rocks.
What are you doing you ruffianly red-trickled waves?
Will you kill the courageous giant? will you kill him in the prime of his middle age?
Steady and long he struggles,
He is baffled, bang'd, bruis'd, he holds out while his strength holds out,
The slapping eddies are spotted with his blood, they bear him away, they roll him, swing him, turn him,
His beautiful body is borne in the circling eddies, it is continually bruis'd on rocks.
Swiftly and out of sight is borne the brave corpse.

4

I turn but do not extricate myself,
Confused a past-reading, another, but with darkness yet.
The beach is cut by the razory ice-wind, the wreck-guns sound,
The tempest lulls, the moon comes floundering through the drifts.
I look where the ship helplessly heads end on, I hear the burst as she strikes, I hear the howls of dismay, they grow fainter and fainter.
I cannot aid with my wringing fingers,
I can but rush to the surf and let it drench me and freeze upon me.
I search with the crowd, not one of the company is wash'd to us alive,
In the morning I help pick up the dead and lay them in rows in a barn.

5

Now of the older, war-days, the defeat at Brooklyn,
Washington stands inside the lines, he stands on the intrench'd hills amid a crowd of officers,

His face is cold and damp, he cannot repress the weeping drops,
He lifts the glass perpetually to his eyes, the color is blanch'd from his cheeks,
He sees the slaughter of the southern braves confided to him by their parents.

The same at last and at last when peace is declared.

He stands in the room of the old tavern, the well-belov'd soldiers all pass through,
The officers speechless and slow draw near in their turns,
The chief encircles their necks with his arm and kisses them on the cheek,
He kisses lightly the wet cheeks one after another, he shakes hands and bids good-by to the army.

6

Now what my mother told me one day as we sat at dinner together,
Of when she was a nearly grown girl living home with her parents on the old homestead.

A red squaw came one breakfast-time to the old homestead.

On her back she carried a bundle of rushes for rush-bottoming chairs,
Her hair, straight, shiny, coarse, black, profuse, half-envelop'd her face,
Her step was free and elastic, and her voice sounded exquisitely as she spoke.

My mother look'd in delight and amazement at the stranger,
She look'd at the freshness of her tall-borne face and full and pliant limbs,
The more she look'd upon her she loved her,
Never before had she seen such wonderful beauty and purity,
She made her sit on a bench by the jamb of the fireplace, she cook'd food for her,
She had no work to give her, but she gave her remembrance and fondness.

The red squaw staid all the forenoon, and toward the middle of the afternoon she went away,
O my mother was loth to have her go away,
All the week she thought of her, she watch'd for her many a month,
She remember'd her many a winter and many a summer,
But the red squaw never came nor was heard of there again.

7

A show of the summer softness—a contract of something unseen—an amour of the light and air,
I am jealous and overwhelm'd with friendliness,
And will go gallivant with the light and air myself.

O love and summer, you are in the dreams and in me,
Autumn winter are in the dreams, the farmer goes with his thrift,
The droves and crops increase, the barns are well-fill'd.

Elements merge in the night, ships make tacks in the dreams,
The sailor sails, the exile returns home,
The fugitive returns unharm'd, the immigrant is back beyond months and years,
The poor Irishman lives in the simple house of his childhood with the well-known neighbors and faces,
They warmly welcome him, he is barefoot again, he forgets he is well off.

The Dutchman voyages home, and the Scotchman and Welshman voyage home, and the native of the Mediterranean voyages home,
To every port of England, France, Spain, enter well-fill'd ships,
The Swiss foots it toward his hills, the Prussian goes his way, the Hungarian his way, and the Pole his way,
The Swede returns, and the Dane and Norwegian return.

The homeward bound and the outward bound,
The beautiful lost swimmer, the ennuye, the onanist, the female that loves unrequited, the money-maker,
The actor and actress, those through with their parts and those waiting to commence,
The affectionate boy, the husband and wife, the voter, the nominee that is chosen and the nominee that has fail'd,
The great already known and the great any time after to-day,
The stammerer, the sick, the perfect-form'd, the homely,
The criminal that stood in the box, the judge that sat and sentenced him, the fluent lawyers, the jury, the audience,
The laugher and weeper, the dancer, the midnight widow, the red squaw,
The consumptive, the erysipalite, the idiot, he that is wrong'd,
The antipodes, and everyone between this and them in the dark,
I swear they are averaged now—one is no better than the other,
The night and sleep have liken'd them and restored them.

I swear they are all beautiful,
Every one that sleeps is beatiful, every thing in the dim light is beautiful,
The wildest and bloodiest is over, and all is peace.

Peace is always beautiful,
The myth of heaven indicates peace and night.

The myth of heaven indicates the soul,
The soul is always beautiful, it appears more or it appears less, it comes or it lags behind,
It comes from its embower'd garden and looks pleasantly on itself and encloses the world,
Perfect and clean the genitals previously jetting, and pertect and clean the womb cohering,
The head well-grown proportion'd and plumb, and the bowels and joints proportion'd and plumb.

The soul is always beautiful,
The universe is duly in order, every thing is in its place,
What has arrived in its place and what waits shall be in its place,

The twisted skull waits, the watery or rotten blood waits,
The child of the glutton or venerealee waits long, and child of the drunkard waits long, and the drunkard himself waits long,
The sleepers that lived and died wait, the far advanced are to go on in their turns, and the far behind are to come on in their turns,
The diverse shall be no less diverse, but they shall flow and unite—they unite now.

8

The sleepers are beautiful as they lie unclothed,
They flow hand in hand over the whole earth from east to west as they lie unclothed,
The Asiatic and African are hand in hand, the European and American are hand in hand,
Learn'd and unlearn'd are hand in hand, and male and female are hand in hand,
The bare arm of the girl crosses the bare breast of her lover, they press close without lust, his lips press her neck,
The father holds his grown or ungrown son in his arms with measureless love, and the son holds the father in his arms with measureless love,
The white hair of the mother shines on the white wrist of the daughter,
The breath of the boy goes with the breath of the man, friend is inarm'd by friend,
The scholar kisses the teacher and the teacher kisses the scholar, the wrong'd is made right,
The call of the slave is one with the master's call, and the master salutes the slave,
The felon steps forth from the prison, the insane becomes sane, the suffering of sick persons is reliev'd,
The sweatings and fevers stop, the throat that was unsound is sound, the lungs of the consumptive are resumed, the poor distress'd head is free,
The joints of the rheumatic move as smoothly as ever, and smoother than ever,
Stiflings and passages open, the paralyzed become supple,
The swell'd and convuls'd and congested awake to themselves in condition,
They pass the invigoration of the night and the chemistry of the night, and awake.

I too pass from the night,
I stay a while away O night, but I return to you again and love you.

Why should I be afraid to trust myself to you ?

I am not afraid, I have been well brought forward by you,
I love the rich running day, but I do not desert her in whom I lay so long,

I know not how I came of you and I know not where I go with you,
but I know I came well and shall go well,
I will stop only a time with the night, and rise betimes,
I will duly pass the day O my mother, and duly return to you.

Transpositions

LET the reformers descend from the stands where they are forever
bawling—let an idiot or insane person appear on each of the
stands ;
Let judges and criminals be transposed—let the prison-keepers be put
in prison—let those that were prisoners take the keys·
Let them that distrust birth and death lead the rest.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

In Section 1, the poet, wandering all night in his vision, observes the human scene. He observes the little children in their cradles, "the livid faces of drunkards, the sick-gray faces of onanists, the insane in their strong-doored rooms." The covering darkness acts as a soothing or healing influence on all these sleepers : "The night pervades them and enfolds them." Next, the poet observes the married couple sleeping calmly in their bed, the sisters sleeping lovingly side by side, the mother sleeping with her child carefully wrapped. Other sleepers whom the poet observes are the blind, the deaf and dumb, the prisoner in the jail, the runaway son, the murderer who is to die the next day. In his vision the poet moves from bedside to bedside. But the poet no longer merely observes. He sleeps with all the sleepers, dreams their dreams, and enters their identities. The poet identifies himself with the "journey men divine", the youthful day-workers, and accompanies them in their wild exploits. Then he identifies himself with the actor, the actress, the voter, the politician, the emigrant, the exile, the criminal, etc ; then with a young woman expecting her lover. Next he identifies himself with the darkness. The psychological experience of the poet's identification with the pervading darkness is described vividly as the terrible experience of being seen naked by the world : "I feel ashamed to go naked about the world." In the last four lines, we are given vivid physical imagery which has sexual implications. The primary point here (lines 66-70) is the parallel between the poet's identification with night and the sexual experience.

In Section 2, the poet in his imagination again assumes various roles. At one moment he is an old woman darning her grand-son's socks, next a sleepless widow, and then a shroud wrapped around a corpse in the coffin. Having run through the gamut of life and death, he feels that merely to be alive is happiness enough for any one : "Whoever is not in his coffin and the dark grave, let him know he has enough."

In Sections 3, 4, and 5 the poet dramatizes scenes of shipwreck and battle, sometimes as participant, sometimes as spectator. He describes the wreck of a ship in the tempest from the point of view of one standing on the sea-shore :

> I look where the ship helplessly heads end on... I hear the
> burst as she strikes...I hear the howls of dismay...they
> grow fainter and fainter.

Not a single man has survived the ship-wreck. The poet then goes on to speak of a battle. He re-creates an incident that involves close ties that bind men together. George Washington the Commander, is presented first in defeat (the defeat at Brooklyn), and his condition is thus described: "His face is cold and damp...he cannot repress the weeping drops." The Commander is next described after the declaration of peace when he bids farewell to his soldiers"...he shakes hands and bids good-bye to the army."

In Section 6, the poet tells the story of an Indian squaw[1] who visited his mother and then disappeared for ever from his mother's sight. His mother discovered that the squaw was a primitive example of "beauty and purity." The more she looked upon her, the more she loved her. But as with Washington and his army, there came a time for parting. After the departure of the squaw, the poet's mother felt a great loss and a deep longing: "But the Red squaw never came nor was heard of there again." Both of these episodes (about George Washington and about the poet's mother) are intended to convey the fundamental and lasting spiritual relationship that exists among human beings. After the moving narrative of the visit of the Indian squaw, the poet feels himself to be the heir of Lucifer and harbours the emotions of revolt and revenge. What the poet is really revolting against is such evils as slavery which enables the owner to sell the Negro's wife to a new master.

In Section 7, the poet's mood changes to one of ecstasy. The poet gives us a long catalogue of persons in many conditions and occupations of life. No matter what their social status or geographical location, they all become equal in sleep:

> I swear they are averaged now—one is no better than the
> other,
> The night and sleep have likened them and restored them.
> I swear they are all beautiful:
> Everyone that sleeps is beautiful...

The poet then turns to the soul which also is beautiful, "always beautiful.'' Because of its divine nature, the soul by its very presence makes us feel the physical processes of the human body to be "perfect and clean." The body with its various limbs and organs deserves respect because of the presence in it of the soul. In the closing lines of this section, the poet expresses his faith in the existence of a divine plan that makes life meaningful:

> The universe is duly in order, every thing is in its place,
> What has arrived is in its place, and what waits is in its place.

In Section 8, the poet observes that "the sleepers are very beautiful as they lie unclothed." We are given another catalogue of diffierent kinds of sleepers, all united with one another by the

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1. *Squaw*—an American-Indian wife.

bond of spiritual love. At the end of this Section, the poet returns to an examination of self. He imagines the night as his progenitor, as his mother. He seems to identify the night with the spiritual world and the day with the material world. Addressing the night, he says : "I will duly pass the day O my mother and duly return to you." It is obvious that by his return to night, he symbolically means his actual death. But he also goes on to say : "Not you will yield forth the dawn again more surely than you will yield forth me again", which means the poet's re-birth. Thus the closing lines of the poem seem to express the writer's faith in the eternal scheme of life-death-rebirth. The poet is happy not because he expects his soul to go to live an eternal life in heaven, but because he expects to live again in this world. We may therefore safely assume that the philosophical concept of the poem is reincarnation.

The Sleepers (originally called "Night Poem" and then "Sleep-Chasings" is one of Whitman's most remarkable poems. "The technique is that of the dream—the unhindered flow of the images of the sub-conscious. The poem's opening launches the poet on a night journey that brings about his encounter with haters as well as lovers, with the macabre as well as the enchanting—all enwrapped and pervaded by night. Night becomes a symbol of the innate spirituality of all things. Darkness brings to the fore that 'seed perfection' which resides hidden. Night, coming from without, results in a spiritual peace unknown to day. Night becomes a miniature (and daily) death, accomplishing its small scale and temporarily what death does on a large scale and permanently."

"In *The Sleepers* the ego is shown celebrating its oneness with all other egos. In the night, in sleep, the poet is able to lose his sense of individuated self and make vital contact with all other selves. Yet in the poem there emerges a sense of creativity so strong as to urge against the very oneness which is the poet's intended subject. The poem begins thus :

> I wander all night in my vision
> Stepping with light feet, swiftly and noiselessly stepping and stopping,
> Bending with open eyes over the shut eyes of the sleepers,
> Wandering and confused, lost to myself, ill-assorted, contradictory,
> Pausing, gazing, bending, and stopping.

'My vision' is the key phrase here. For as the poem develops, the night is conceived of as the poet's lover, rendering him utterly passive. In this stage he envisions himself as possessing and possessed by all men and all women, good and evil, now so undifferentiated as to be universally beautiful. He comes to see that it is "the night and sleep (which have) liken'd them and restored them." The night is then given its richest definition.

> I too pass from the night,
> I stay a while away O night, but I return to you again and love you,

Why should I be afraid to trust myself to you ?
I am not afraid, I have been well brought forward by you,
I love the rich running day, but I do not desert her
in whom I lay so long.
I know not how I came of you and I know not where I go
with you, but I know I came well and shall go well.
I will stop only a time with the night, and rise betimes,
I will duly pass the day O my mother, and duly return
to you.

It is thus a primal source of creativity, lover and genetrix, to which the poet must return, even as he must leave it for his day-time life. This passage is often read as involving a notion of the transcendental source of being, so that night equals death-in-life and life-in-death, dissolution of the temporal into the eternal, and the like."

22

To Think of Time

(First published in 1855)

I. TEXT

1

To think of time—of all that retrospection,
To think of to-day, and the ages continued henceforward.

Have you guess'd you yourself would not continue ?
Have you dreaded these earth-beetles ?
Have you fear'd the future would be nothing to you ?

Is to-day nothing ? is the beginningless past nothing ?
If the future is nothing they are just as surely nothing.

To think that the sun rose in the east—that men and women were flexible, real, alive—that everything was alive,
To think that you and I did not see, feel, think, nor bear our part,
To think that we are now here and bear our part.

2

Not a day passes, not a minute or second without an accouchement,
Not a day passes, not a minute or second without a corpse.
The dull nights go over and the dull days also,
The soreness of lying so much in bed goes over,
The physician after long putting off gives the silent and terrible look for an answer,
The children come hurried and weeping, and the brothers and sisters are sent for
Medicines stand unused on the shelf, (the camphor-smell has long pervaded the rooms,)
The faithful hand of the living does not desert the hand of the dying,
The twitching lips press lightly on the forehead of the dying,
The breath ceases and the pulse of the heart ceases,
The corpse stretches on the bed and the living look upon it,
It is palpable as the living are palpable.

The living look upon the corpse with their eyesight,
But without eyesight lingers a different living and looks curiously on the corpse.

3

To think the thought of death merged in the thought of materials,
To think of all these wonders of city and country, and others taking great interest in them, and we taking no interest in them.

To think how eager we are in building our houses,
To think others shall be just as eager, and we quite indifferent.

(I see one building the house that serves him a few years, or seventy or eighty years at most,
I see one building the house that serves him longer than that.)
Slow-moving and black lines creep over the whole earth—they never cease—they are the burial lines,
He that was President was buried, and he that is now President shall surely be buried.

4

A reminiscence of the vulgar fate,
A frequent sample of the life and death of workmen,
Each after his kind.

Cold dash of waves at the ferry-wharf, posh and ice in the river, half-frozen mud in the streets,
A gray discouraged sky overhead, the short last daylight of December,
A hearse and stages, the funeral of an old Broadway stage-driver, the cortege mostly drivers.

Steady the trot to the cemetery, duly rattles the death-bell,
The gate is pass'd, the new dug-grave is halted at, the living alight, the hearse uncloses,
The coffin is pass'd out, lower'd and settled the whip is laid on the coffin, the earth in swiftly shovel'd in,
The mound above is flatted with the spades—silence,
A minute—no one moves or speaks—it is done,
He is decently put away—is there any thing more ?
He was a good fellow, free-mouth'd, quick-temper'd, not bad-looking,
Ready with life or death for a friend, fond of women. gambled, ate hearty, drank hearty,
Had known what it was to be flush, grew low-spirited toward the last, sicken'd, was help, by a contribution,
Died, aged forty-one years—and that was his funeral.

Thumb extended, finger uplifted, apron, cape, gloves, strap, wet-weather clothes, whip carefully chosen,
Boss, spotter, starter, hostler, somebody loafing on you, you loafing on somebody, headway, man before and man behind,
Good day's work, bad day's work, pet stock, mean stock, first out last, out, turning-in at night,
To think that these are so much and so nigh to other drivers, and he there takes no interest in them.

5

The markets, the government, the working man's wages, to think what account they are through our nights and days.

To think that other working-men will make just as great account of them, yet we make little or no account.

The vulgar and the refined, what you call sin and what you call goodness, to think how wide a difference,
To think the difference will still continue to others, yet we lie beyond the difference.

To think how much pleasure there is,
Do you enjoy yourself in the city ? or engaged in business ? or planning a nomination and election ? or with your wife and family ?
Or with your mother and sisters ? or in womanly housework ? or the beautiful maternal cares ?
These also flow onward to others, you and I flow onward,
But in due time you and I shall take less interest in them.

You farm, profits, crops—to think how engross'd you are,
To think there will still be farms, profits, crops, yet for you of what avail ?

6

What will be will be well, for what is is well,
To take interest is well, and not to take interest shall be well.

The domestic joys, the daily housework or business, the building of houses, are not phantasms, they have weight, form, location,
Farms, profits crops, markets, wages, government, are none of them phantasms,
The difference between sin and goodness is no delusion,
The earth is not an echo, man and his life and all the things of his life are well-consider'd.

You are not thrown to the winds, you gather certainly and safely around yourself,
Yourself ! yourself ! yourself, for ever and ever !

7

It is not to diffuse you that you were born of your mother and father, it is to identify you,
It is not that you should be undecided, but that you should be decided,
Something long preparing and formless is arrived and form'd in you,
You are henceforth secure, whatever comes or goes.
The threads that were spun are gather'd, the weft crosses the warp, the pattern is systematic.
The preparations have every one been justified,
The orchestra have sufficiently tuned their instruments, the baton has given the signal.
The guest that was coming, he waited long, he is now housed,
He is one of those who are beautiful and happy, he is one of those that to look upon and be with is enough.
The law of the past cannot be eluded,
The law of the present and future cannot be eluded,
The law of the living cannot be eluded, it is eternal,

The law of promotion and transformation cannot be eluded,
The law of heroes and good-doers cannot be eluded,
The law of drunkards, informers, mean persons, not one iota thereof can be eluded.

8

Slow moving and black lines go ceaselessly over the earth,
Northerner goes carried and Southerner goes carried, and they on the Atlantic side and they on the Pacific,
And they between, and all through the Mississippi country, and all over the earth.

The great masters and kosmos are well as they go, the heroes and good-doers are well,
The known leaders and inventors and the rich owners and pious and distinguish'd may be well,
But there is more account than that, there is strict account of all.

The interminable hordes of the ignorant and wicked are not nothing,
The barbarians of Africa and Asia are not nothing,
The perpetual successions of shallow people are not nothing as they go.

Of and in all these things,
I have dream'd that we are not to be changed so much, nor the law of us changed,
I have dream'd that heroes and good-doers shall be under the present and past law,
And that murderers, drunkards, liars shall be under the present and past law,
For I have dream'd that the law they are under now is enough.

And I have dream'd that the purpose and essence of the known life, the transient,
Is to form and decide identity for the unknown life, the permanent.
If all came but to ashes of dung,
If maggots and rats ended us, then Alarum ! for we are betray'd,
Then indeed suspicion of death.

Do you suspect death ? If I were to suspect death I should die now,
Do you think I could walk pleasantly and well-suited toward annihilation ?
Pleasantly and well-suited I walk,
Whither I walk I cannot define, but I know it is good,
The whole universe indicates that it is good,
The past and the present indicate that it is good.

How beautiful and perfect are the animals !
How perfect the earth, and the minutest thing upon it !
What is called good is perfect, and what is called bad is just as perfect,
The vegetables and minerals are all perfect, and the imponderable fluids perfect ;
Slowly and surely they have pass'd on to this and slowly and surely they yet pass on.

9

I swear I think now that every thing without exception has an eternal
soul !
The trees have rooted in the ground ! the weeds of the sea have !
the animals !
I swear I think there is nothing but immortality !
That the exquisite scheme is for it, and the nebulous float is for it,
and the cohering is for it !
And all preparation is for it—and identity is for it—and life and
materials are altogether for it !

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Stanza 1 : The poet reflects upon the continuity of time, the past, the present, and the future. The future would be nothing to us because we will not exist. But if the future is nothing to us, the past and the present are also nothing. In the past too the sun rose in the east, and men and women were real and alive. But we did not then exist. We exist now and bear our part.

Stanza 2 : Not a day, not a minute, not a second passes without a birth and without a death. The dull nights pass and the dull days also pass. The sick man dies, mourned by his relations. The dead body is as palpable as the living.

Stanza 3 : All the wonders of city and country in which we are so interested shall cease to have any meaning for us in the future when we are no more. However there will be others to feel interested in these wonders. Today we are eager in building our houses. When we are no more, others shall be equally eager to build their houses. A house built by a man may serve him a few years, or seventy years or eighty years. People die, and the number of graves goes on increasing. He who was President (of the country) now lies buried, and he who is President now shall surely be buried when his time comes.

Stanza 4 : The death of a coach-driver may be taken as an example of the death of workmen. The funeral procession in this case consists mostly of drivers. They all walk slowly to the graveyard and halt at the newly-dug grave. The dead coach-driver is buried. He was a good fellow, talkative, quick-tempered, not bad-looking. He died at the age of forty-one. He was interested in his routine duties in which his fellow-drivers were also interested. After is death, nothing matters to him.

Stanza 5 : The markets, the government, the working men's ctivities will continue. But we shall be no more and shall there-ore. not be able to witness these things. The difference between the ulgar and the refined, and the difference between sinfulness and oodness will continue. but we shall be no more in this world to see at difference. The pleasures of life will continue. Farms, profits, ops which keep us busy today will also continue ; but, when we re[illegible]d, there will be others to enjoy these things.

Stanza 6 : We should not feel sorry to think that, after death, we shall not be able to take interest in the world and its occupations. Everything in this world is real. The difference between sin and goodness is also real. Human life is not wasted just because it comes to an end.

Stanza 7 : The birth of a human being means that he has been identified, not diffused. A birth means that something that had long been formless and in preparation has now taken a definite shape. He who is born is for ever secure. Certain laws cannot be shelved. The law of the past, the law of the present and the future, the law of the living, the law of heroes, the law of good-doers and evil-doers—none of these laws can be eluded.

Stanza 8 : People die ceaselessly everywhere over the earth. The great masters, the heroes, the good-doers, the leaders and inventors, rich owners—they must all depart. All lives are valuable. The lives of the ignorant and the wicked, the lives of the uncivilized people of Africa and Asia, the lives of shallow people—these are all valuable. Heroes and good-doers, murderers, drunkards, liars. are all governed by the law which is inescapable. The purpose of this life, which is short, is to prepare for the next life which is permanent. We should not think that this life is meaningless and will come to nothing. We do not know our ultimate goal, but we should have faith that the goal will be good. Everything on this earth is perfect, and this perfection has been achieved through continuous development.

Stanza 9 : Everything in this world has an eternal soul—even the trees, the weeds, and the animals. Immortality is a sure fact. The whole scheme of the universe points towards immortality.

The first five stanzas of this poem create a pathetic, almost, tragic, atmosphere. We are bound to feel sad when we are reminded that the future means nothing to us because we shall be no more in this world to witness its activities and to participate in them : "To think of all these wonders of city and country, and others taking great interest in them, and we taking no interest in them." Death is a hard fact : "He that was President was buried, and he that is now President shall surely be buried." What a pity that we too shall die and thus be cut off from all the pleasures of the world !

The description of the death of a sick man in the second stanza is very touching. The physician at last indicates that the patient is going to die. The poet gives us a very realistic picture of what happens then :

> The children come hurried and weeping, and the brothers
> and sisters are sent for,
> Medicines stand unused on the shelf, (the camphor-smell has
> long pervaded the rooms,)
> The faithful hand of the living does not desert the hand of
> the dying,
>
> The twitching lips press lightly on the forehead of the
> dying,

> The breath ceases and the pulse of the heart ceases,
> The corpse stretches on the bed and the living look upon it,
> It is palpable as the living are palpable.

The description of the funeral of a coach-driver is also very touching :

> The coffin is passed out, lowered and settled, the whip is laid on the coffin, the earth is swiftly shovel'd in,
> The mound above is flatted with the spades—silence,
> A minute—no one moves or speaks—it is done,
> He is decently put away—is there anything more ?

The essential character of the coach-driver is indicated in a few phrases. He was a good fellow, free-mounted, quick-tempered, not bad-looking. He was ready to die for a friend. He was fond of women. He "gambled, ate hearty, drank hearty, had known what it was to be flush." But he, "grew low-spirited toward the last, sickened, was helped by a contribution, died, aged forty-one years—and that was his funeral." The character of the coach-driver is so sketched as to make him appear to be an amiable and likable person

Stanzas 6 to 9 strike a different note. In these stanzas we get the characteristic optimism of Walt Whitman. In this part of the poem, Whitman expresses his unwavering and unflinching faith in the essential goodness of this universe. In lines that are reminiscent of the optimism of Browning, Whitman says : "What will be will be well, for what is is well", and thus consoles us for being prevented by death from continuing to take interest in the world : "To take interest is well, and not to take interest shall be well." This world, he says, is real and earnest. He does not reject the world and its interests as an illusion. He does not take refuge in philosophic abstractions, but accepts the world as it is. The domestic joys, the daily house-work or business, the building of houses, farms, profits, crops, markets, wages, government—these are not illusions or phantasms. The difference between sin and goodness is also not an illusion. The earth is not an illusion. Man and his life and all the things of his life are well-considered and well-planned. No human life is wasted : "You are not thrown to the winds." Every human individual is a reality, and his arrival in this world is the result of a plan : "The pattern is systematic." Acceptance is, indeed, the key-note of stanzas 6 to 9 :

> The interminable hordes of the ignorant and wicked are not nothing,
> The barbarians of Asia and Africa are not nothing,
> The perpetual successions of shallow people are not nothing as they go.

This life, says Whitman, has a purpose The purpose of this life, the transient life, is to prepare for the unknown life, the life to come, which is permanent. We should not think that this life is aimless or that it will come to nothing. We are not walking towards annihilation. Whither we are walking we do not know, but we should be sure that we are walking towards something good :

> The whole universe indicates that it is good,
> The past and the present indicate that it is good.

The universe in which we live should be fully acceptable to us, because everything in it has, after continuous development, reached a certain degree of perfection. The animals are perfect ; the minutest thing on this earth is perfect ; what is called good is perfect and what is called bad is just as perfect ; the vegetables and the minerals and fluids are all perfect. The final stanza asserts a faith in the existence of the soul and in the soul's immortality. The poet swears that "everything without exception has an eternal soul", and he swears that "there is nothing but immortality." The poet's faith in the immortality of the soul is expressed in a firm and unambiguous manner.

As in other poems, Whitman does not ignore the dark side of life. He is keenly aware of the existence of evil and sin, but he accepts these as part of the pattern of the universe. He recognises the fact that there are not only heroes and good-doers in the world, but also murderers, drunkards, liars, informers, and mean persons. The existence of such people in the world does not, however, depress him in the least.

With its radiant optimism, this poem has a heartening and tonic effect upon the reader. It is a poem by reading which we find it possible to reconcile ourselves to this world with all its ugliness and its evil. It is a poem that broadens our outlook and enables us to embrace the whole world with all its multitudinous variety of people, occupations, and interests. Not the least important feature of this poem is its democratic quality. The fourth stanza deals with the life and death of an ordinary coach-driver, and this serves as a "sample of the life and death of workmen." The pleasures mentioned in the poem are all of a simple variety :

> Do you enjoy yourself in the city ? or engaged in business ? or planning a nomination and election ? or with your wife and family ?
> Or with your mother and sisters ? or in womanly housework ? or the beautiful maternal cares ?

23

There was a Child Went Forth

(First published in 1855)

I. TEXT

THERE was a child went forth everyday,
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.
The early lilacs became part of this child,
And grass and white and red morning-glories, and white and red clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird,
And the Third-month lambs and the sow's pink-faint litter and the mare's foal and the cow's calf,
And the noisy brood of the barnyard or by the mire of the pond-side,
And the fish suspending themselves so curiously below there, and the beautiful curious liquid,
And the water-plants with their graceful flat heads, all became part of him.
The field-sprouts of Fourth-month and Fifth-month became part of him,
Winter-grain sprouts and those of the light-yellow corn, and the esculent roots of the garden,
And the apple-trees cover'd with blossoms and the fruit afterward, and wood-berries, and the commonest weeds by the road,
And the old drunkard staggering home from the outhouse of the tavern whence he had lately risen,
And the schoolmistress that pass'd on her way to the school,
And the friendly boys that pass'd and the quarrelsome boys,
And the tidy and fresh-cheek'd girls, and the barefoot negro boy and girl,
And all the changes of city and country wherever he went.
His own parents, he that had father'd him and she that had conceiv'd him in her womb and birth'd him,
They gave this child more of themselves than that,
They gave him afterward everyday, they became part of him.
The mother at home quietly placing the dishes on the supper-table,

The mother with mild words, clean her cap and gown, a wholesome odor falling off her person and clothes as she walks by,
The father, strong, self-sufficient, manly, mean, anger'd, unjust,
The blow, the quick loud word, the tight bargain, the crafty lure,
The family usages, the language, the company, the furniture the yearning and swelling heart,
Affection that will not be gainsay'd, the sense of what is real, the thought if after all it should prove unreal,
The doubts of day-time and the doubts of night-time, the curious whether and how,
Whether that which appears so is so, or is it all flashes and specks ?
Men and women crowding fast in the streets. if they are not flashes and specks what are they ?
The streets themselves and the facedes of houses. and goods in the windows,
Vehicles, teams, the heavy-plank'd wharves, the huge crossing at the ferries.
The village on the highland seen from afar at sunset, the river between,
Shadows, aureola and mist, the light falling on roofs and gables of white or brown two miles off,
The schooner near by sleepily dropping down the tied, the little boat slack tow'd astern,
The hurrying tumbling waves, quick-broken crests, slapping,
The strata of color'd clouds, the longer bar of maroon-tint away solitary by itself, the spread of purity it lies motionless in,
The horizon's edge, the flying sea-crow, the fragrance of salt marsh and shore mud,
These became part of that child who went forth every day, and who now goes, and will always go forth every day.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The theme of this poem is that a child absorbs and assimilates everything that he sees, everything that he encounters, and everything that he comes into contact with. All the sights, the sounds, and the experiences of a human being become a permanent part of his being and thinking. To illustrate this idea, the poet describes a large number of things and persons with whom the child came into contact and who bacame part of him. Accordingly, we have several catalogues in the poem, which not only illustrate the idea but which also show Whitman's all embracing interest in things and persons. The poem, like so many others from Whitman's pen, is remarkable for its varied imagery.

In the first catalogue, the poet mentions lilacs, grass, clover, the song of the phoebe-bird, the lambs, the foal, the calf, the hens, the fish, and the water-plants.

The second catalogue contains field-sprouts, apple trees covered with blossoms, the old drunkard staggering home, the school-mistress on her way to the school, the friendly boys and the quarrelsome boys, the fresh-cheeked girls, and the bare-foot Negro boy and girl. The next catalogue describes the child's parents, he that had fathered him, and she that had conceived and given birth to him. A vivid picture of the father and the mother is given—the mother with mild words, the father rough and ill-tempered.

The last catalogue describes men and women crowding in the streets, horse-drawn vehicles, the village, the river, the tumbling waves, etc.

All these things and persons became part of the child "who then went forth every day, and who now goes, and will always go forth every day."

24

Faces

(First published in 1855)

I. TEXT

1

SAUNTERING the pavement or riding the country by-road, lo, such faces !
Faces of friendship, precision, caution, suavity, ideality,
The spiritual-prescient face, the always welcome common benevolent face,
The face of the singing of music, the grand faces of natural lawyers and judges broad at the back-top,
The faces of hunters and fishers bulged at the brows, the shaved blanch'd faces of orthodox citizens,
The pure, extravagant, yearning, questioning artist's face,
The ugly face of some beautiful soul, the handsome detested or despised face,
The sacred faces of infants, the illuminated face of the mother of many children,
The face of an amour, the face of veneration.
The face as of a dream, the face of an immobile rock,
The face withdrawn of its good and bad, a castrated face,
A wild hawk, his wings clipp'd by the clipper,
A stallion that yielded at last to the thongs and knife of the gelder.
Sauntering the pavement thus, or crossing the ceaseless ferry, faces and faces and faces,
I see them and complain not, and am content with all.

2

Do you suppose I could be content with all if I thought them their own finale ?
This now is too lamentable a face for a man,
Some abject louse asking have to be, cringing for it,
Some milk-nosed maggot blessing what lets it wrig to its hole.
This face is a dog's snout sniffing for garbage,
Snakes nest in that mouth, I hear the sibilant threat.
The face is a haze more chill than the arctic sea,
Its sleepy and wabbling icebergs crunch as they go.
This is a face of bitter herbs, this an emetic, they need no lebel,
And more of the drug-shelf, laudanum, caoutchouc, or hog's lard.

This face is an epilepsy, its wordless tongue gives out the unearthly cry,
Its veins down the neck distend, its eyes roll till they show nothing but their whites,
Its teeth grit, the palms of the hands are cut by the turn'd-in nails,
The man falls struggling and foaming to the ground, while he speculates well.

This face is bitten by vermin and worms,
And this is some murderer's knife with a half-pull'd scabbard.

This face owes to the sexton his dismalest fee,
An unceasing-death bell tolls there.

3

Features of my equals would you trick me with your creas'd and cadaverous march ?
Well, you cannot trick me.

I see your rounded never-erased flow,
I see 'neath the rims of your haggard and mean disguises.

Splay and twist as you like, poke with the tangling fores of fishes or rats,
You'll be unmuzzled, you certainly will.

I saw the face of the most smear'd and slobbering idiot they had at the asylum,
And I knew for my consolation what they knew not,
I knew of the agents that emptied and broke my brother,
The same wait to clear the rubbish from the fallen tenement,
And I shall look again in a score or two of ages,
And I shall meet the real landlord perfect and unharm'd, every inch as good as myself.

4

The Lord advances and yet advances,
Always the shadow in front, always the reach'd hand bringing up the laggards.

Out of this face emerge banners and horses—O superb ! I see what is coming.

I see the high pioneer-caps, see staves of runners clearing the way,
I hear victorious drums.

This face is a life-boat.

This is the face commanding and bearded, it asks no odds of the rest,
This face is flavor'd fruit ready for eating,

This face of a healthy honest boy is the programme of all good.
These faces bear testimony slumbering or awake,
They show their descent from the Master himself.

Off the word I have spoken I except not one—red, white, black, are all deific,
In each house is the ovum, it comes forth after a thousand years.

Spots or cracks at the windows do not disturb me,
Tall and sufficient stand behind and make signs to me,
I read the promise and patiently wait.

This is a full-grown lily's face,
She speaks to the limber-hipp'd man near the garden pickets,
Come here she blushingly cries, *Come nigh to me limber-hipp'd man,*
Stand at my side till I lean as high as I can upon you,
Fill me with albescent honey, bend down to me,
Rub to me with your chafing beard, rub to my breast and shoulders.

5

The old face of the mother of many children,
Whist ! I am fully content.

Lull'd and late is the smoke of the First-day morning,
It hangs low over the rows of the trees by the fences,
It hangs thin by the sassafras and will-cherry and cat-brier under
them.

I saw the rich ladies in full dress at the soiree,
I heard what the singers were singing so long,
Heard who sprang in crimson youth from the white forth and the
water-blue.

Behold a woman !
She looks out from her quaker cap, her face is clearer and more
beautiful than the sky.

She sits in an armchair under the shaded porch of the farm-house,
The sun just shines on her old white head.

Her ample gown is of cream-hued linen,
Her grandsons raised the flax, and her grand-daughters spun it with
distaff and the wheel.

The melodious character of the earth,
The finish beyond which philosophy cannot go and does not wish to
go,
The justified mother of men.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Loitering on the pavements or crossing the ferry or travelling along the country by-road, the poet sees all kinds of faces—the spiritual face, the benevolent face, the faces of lawyers and judges, the faces of hunters and fishers, the faces of artists and children and mothers, and so on. The poet sees these faces and complains not. He is content with all these faces. This attitude of the poet towards faces emphasises the democratic theme in the poet's philosophy. But the poet has a faith in the ultimate justification of these faces. He would not be content with these faces if he thought them to be "their own finale." Even the "most smear'd and slobbering idiot" at a mental asylum has his spark of divinity. This faith is a faith in a divine plan, in the "seed perfection" existent even in the lowliest or meanest of creatures, to come to fruition in the progression of mystic evolution. The poem concludes with a full portrait of the mother, wearing her quaker cap :

> Behold a woman !
> She looks out from her quaker cap, her face is clearer and more beautiful than the sky,
> She sits in an armed chair under the shaded porch of the farm-house,
> The sun just shines on her old white head.

The three concluding lines of the poem produce in us the feeling that a life of simplicity as implied by the picture of the mother is a fulfilled life that is right and in harmony with the world and the universe

25

Crossing Brooklyn Ferry

(First published in 1856)

I. TEXT

1

FLOOD-TIDE below me ! I see you face to face !
Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour high—I see you also face to face.
Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me !
On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose,
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.

2

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the day,
The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,
The similitudes of the past and those of the future,
The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings, the walk in the street and the passage over the river,
The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me far away,
The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them,
The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others.
Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore,
Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of Brooklyn to the south and east.
Others will see the islands large and small ;
Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high,
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them,
Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the falling back to the sea of the ebb-tide.

3

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky so, I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.

I too many and many a time cross'd the river of old,
Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high in the air floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong shadow,
Saw the slow-wheeling circles and the gradual edging toward the south,
Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,
Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,
Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sunlit water,
Look'd on the haze on the hills southward and south-westward,
Look'd on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,
Look'd toward the lower bay to notice the vessels arriving,
Saw their approach, saw abroad those that were near me,
Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops, saw the ships at anchor,
The sailors at work in the rigging or out astride the spars,
The round masts, the swinging motion, of the hulls, the slender serpentine pennants.
The large and small steamers in motion the pilots in their pilot-houses
The white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl of the wheels,
The flags of all nations, the falling of them at sunset,
The scallop-edged waves in the twilight, the ladled cups, the frolicsome crests and glistening,
The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the gray walls of the granite storehouses by the docks,
On the river the shadowy group, the big steam-tug closely flank'd on each side by the barges, the hay-boat, the belated lighter.
On the neighboring shore the fires from the foundry chimneys burning high and glaringly into the night,
Casting their flicker of black contrasted with wild red and yellow light over the tops of houses, and down into the clefts of streets.

4

These and all else were to me the same as they are to you,
I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river,
The men and women I saw were all near to me,

Others the same—others who look back on me because I look'd forward to them,
(The time will come, though I stop here to-day and to-night)

5

What is then between us ?
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us ?
Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not,
I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine,
I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the waters around it,
I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,
In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon me,
In my walks home late at night or as I lay in my bed they came upon me,
I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,
I too had receiv'd identity by my body,
That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I should be my body.

6

It is not upon you alone the dark park patches fall,
The dark threw its patches down upon me also,
The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious,
My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality meagre ?

Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil,
I am he who knew what it was to be evil,
I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,
Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,
Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant,
The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,
The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish. not wanting,
Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of these wanting,
Was one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest,
Was call'd by my nighest name by clear loud voices of young men as they saw me approaching or passing,
Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their flesh against me as I sat,
Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly, yet never told them a word,
Lived the same life with the rest, the same old laughing, gnawing, sleeping,
Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor or actress,
The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we like,
Or as small as we like, or both great and small.

7

Closer yet I approach you,
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in advance,
I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.
Who was to know what should come home to me?
Who knows, but I am enjoying this?
Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?

8

Ah, what can ever be more stately admirable to me than mast-hemm'd Manhattan?
River and sunset and scallop-edg'd waves of flood-tide?
The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay-boat in the twilight and the belated lighter?
What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with voices I love call me promptly and loudly by my nighest name as I approach?
What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face?
Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?
We understand then do we not?
What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?
What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish is accomplish'd, is it not?

9

Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!
Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!
Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me!
Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!
Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta! stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn!
Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers!
Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!
Gaze, loving and thirsting eyes, in the house or street or public assembly!
Sound out, voices of young men loudly and musically call me by my nighest name!
Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or actress!
Play the old role, the role that is great or small according as one makes it!
Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown ways be looking upon you;
Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet haste with the hasting current;
Fly on, sea-birds! fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in the air;

Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till all downcast eyes have time to take it from you !
Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any one's head, in the sunlit water !
Come on, ships from the lower bay ! pass up or down, whitesail'd schooners, sloops, lighters !
Flaunt away, flags of all nations ! be duly lower'd at snnset !
Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys ! cast black shadows a nightfall ! cast red and yellow light over the tops of houses !
Appearance, now or henceforth, indicate what you are,
You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,
About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung our divinest aromas,
Thrive, cities—bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and sufficient rivers,
Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,
Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting,
You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers,
We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate henceforward,
Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves from us,
We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently within us,
We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also,
You furnish your parts toward eternity,
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The poem begins on the factual, realistic level, with the poet considering his ties with the past, present, and future. The poet thinks sympathetically of all the people who have crossed the river on this same ferry, and he feels an identity, a oneness in spirit, with them. Projecting his thoughts into the future, he feels the same identity with the coming generations who will share with him the same experience :

> It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
> I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence......

Symbolically speaking, the poem itself is a ferry, shuttling across the river of time. All those who have read this poem in the past have shared, and all those who will read this poem in future will share, the poet's experience. Rightly therefore does he say : "What is it, then, between us ?" By this he means that there is no barrier between him and the generations to come. In this way the poet attains an identification with the reader, an identification transcending time and space. The ferry ride (from Brooklyn to New York), prosaic enough in itself, thus acquires a special meaning.

Both land and water are a necessary part of the total image of the ferry-boat. The two form a duality symbolic of the physical and the spiritual, body and soul, life and death. Another significant point is the involvement of the ferry-boat with masses of people. These people, unknown to one another, come together for a little while during which their destinies are joined. They come together from different places, and after crossing the river they disperse to their various destinations. This coming together of the passengers for a brief period is portrayed by the poet as being symbolic of the spiritual unity of all mankind.

Section I of the poem introduces the setting (place and time), and the main characters of the drama. The place is the ferry in transit. The time is late afternoon. The characters are (besides the flood-tide, the clouds, and the sun) the poet and the other passengers on the boat.

In Section 2, we have a series of loosely connected images bearing on the curious nature of the poet's relationship with others. The poet describes the basic nature of the universe as being not chaos but order. There is a "simple, compact, well-join'd scheme" that constitutes the essential unity of all mankind. Individuals, though they are "disintegrated", "remain, yet part of the scheme." Peering into the future, the poet says that people fifty years hence or hundreds of years hence will engage in the same activities and will see the same sights as he and other passengers on the boat engage in and see.

In Section 3, the poet, addressing people of the coming generations, asserts : "I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence." The richness of imagery in some of the lines in this Section is rarely equalled elsewhere in Whitman's work. The imagery proceeds from sky to water, to lower bay, and finally to river and shore. Meanwhile the afternoon gives way to sunset, to twilight, and then to night.

Section 4 is merely transitional in nature, looking backward as well as forward. In Section 5, the poet points out that neither distance nor place matters and that there is no barrier between him and the reader (whether the contemporary reader or the reader of the future). In Section 5, we have three crucial lines :

> I too had been struck from the float forever held in
>   solution ;
> I too had receiv'd identity by my body ;
> That I was, I knew was of my body—and what I should
>   be I knew I should be of my body.

The implication here is that the poet, or any individual, comes from and returns to the same spiritual or divine source. The word "solution" suggests the spiritual unity of all mankind. Even though the individual is "struck", he is still "held in solution", which means that he does not become completely separate. The words "That I was, I knew was of my body" mean that the only element that gave him individuality was his physical nature ; his spiritual nature did not separate him from, but joined him to, the mass of mankind.

In Section 6, the poet further emphasises the bonds between him and the reader. The bonds in this Section consist in the evil, the sin, and the guilt that he shares with other people :

> It is not you alone who know what it is to be evil ;
> I am he who knew what it was to be evil :

But the poet does not feel any sense of shame in confessing his sins. On the contrary, there is a tone of robust joy in the multiple and complex activities of life, and the pleasures of the body dominate the Section.

Section 7 opens with the simple statement : "Closer yet I approach you" which suggests that the poet has moved another step towards complete identification with the reader. In Section 8, the chief characters are re-introduced in the same order in which they first appeared in Section 1. But the scene of Section 1 is here modified in so far as we see the symbolic passage of time from sunset to night. The spiritual love that binds man to man, first emphasised in Section 4, receives further emphasis in Section 8 : "What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face ?" And the line that follows strengthens the relationship between the poet and the reader : "Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you ?" Thus the poet feels himself merged with all people whom he has loved during his lifetime, or whom he vicariously anticipates in the future. Now his poem has become a ferry, carrying his thoughts, wishes and sympathy beyond the bounds of his finite life.) "The poet defies time by creating an imperishable work of art, a prophetic wish-fulfilment."

(Section 9 is written in the form of an invocation or appeal. The poet calls upon the river to flow on, to flow with the flow-tide, and to ebb with the ebb-tide. He calls upon the tall masts of Manahatta to stand up, and the beautiful hills of Brooklyn to stand up.) He asks the "eternal flood of solution" to "suspend here and everywhere." (The word "suspend" seems to be used in its chemical sense, meaning "to stay in solution". In other words, the poet wants life to be as abundant and fertile as possible). He urges the voices of young men to call him by his "nighest name." In this way, the first two-thirds of Section 9 is an address by the poet to the major images that have appeared previously in the poem. (At the end of this long series of images the poet says :

> Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are.
> You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,
> About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung
> our divinest aromas...

The word "appearances" here refers back to the vivid images of the immediately preceding lines. The poet wants to understand the reality of these appearances. The film that envelops the soul is perhaps the over-soul or spiritual world. The divine aromas surround the body because of the soul that exists within. The poet thus seems to imply a relationship between objects (appearances and over-soul), and this relationship is similar to the relationship of body and soul. In the concluding lines, the poet describes these objects or appearances as "dumb, beautiful ministers". They are dumb because they do not have human voices. They are beautiful because they appeal to the senses. They are ministers because they minister to the spiritual life or soul. Whitman believes in attaining the spiritual through an acceptance of the physical or material, not a denial of it. "We plant you permanently within us", he says to the appearances or the physical objects. The objects furnish or contribute their "parts toward eternity", and their "parts toward the soul."

26

Song of the Open Road

(First published in 1856)

I. TEXT

1

AFOOT and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.
Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing.
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road.
The earth, that is sufficient,
I do not want the constellations any nearer,
I know they are very well where they are,
I know they suffice for those who belong to them,
(Still here I carry my old delicious burdens.
I carry them, men and women, I carry them with me wherever
  I go,
I swear it is impossible for me to get rid of them,
I am fill'd with them, and I will fill them in return.)

2

You road I enter upon and look around, I believe you are not all
  that is here,
I believe that much unseen is also here,
Here the profound lesson of reception, nor preference nor denial,
The black with his woolly head, the felon, the diseas'd, the illiterate
  person, are not denied,
The birth, the hasting after the physician, the beggar's tramp, the
  drunkard's stagger, the laughing party of mechanics ;
The escaped youth, the rich person's carriage, the fop, the eloping
  couple,
The early market-man, the hearse, the moving of furniture into the
  town, the return back from the town,
They pass, I also pass, any thing passes, none can be interdicted,
None but are accepted, none but shall be dear to me.

3

You air that serves me with breath to speak !
You objects that call from diffusion my meanings and give them shape !
You light that wraps me and all things in delicate equable showers !
You paths worn in the irregular hollows by the roadsides !
I believe you are latent with unseen existences, you are so dear to me.

You flagg'd walks of the cities ! you strong curbs at the edges !
You ferries ! you planks and posts of wharves ! you timber-lined sides ! you distant ships !
You rows of houses ! you window-pierc'd facades ! you roofs !
You porches and enterances ! you copings and iron guards !
You windows whose transparent shells might expose so much !
You doors and ascending steps ! you arches !
You gray stones of interminable pavements ! you trodden crossings !
From all that has touch'd you I believe you have imparted to yourselves, and now would impart the same secretly to me,
From the living and the dead you have peopled your impassive surfaces, and the spirits thereof would be evident and amicable with me.

4

The earth expanding right hand and left hand,
The picture alive, every parts in its best light,
The music falling in where it is wanted, and stopping where it is not wanted,
The cheerful voice of the public road, the gay fresh sentiment of the road,

O highway I travel, do you say to me *Do not leave me* ?
Do you say *Venture not—if you leave me you are lost* ?
Do you say *I am already prepared, I am well beaten and undenied adhere to me* ?

O public road, I say back I am not afraid to leave you, yet I love you,
You express me better than I can express myself,
You shall be more to me than my poem.

I think heroic deeds were all conceiv'd in the open air, and all free poems also,
I think I could stop here myself and do miracles,
I think whatever I shall meet on the road I shall like, and whoever beholds me shall like me,
I think whoever I see must be happy.

5

From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines,
Going where I list, my own master total and absolute,

Listening to others, considering well what they say,
Pausing, searching, receiving contemplating,
Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would hold me.
I inhale great draughts of space,
The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine.
I am larger, better than I thought,
I did not know I held so much goodness.
All seems beautiful to me,
I can repeat over to men and women. You have done such good to me I would do the same to you,
I will recruit for myself and you as I go,
I will scatter myself among men and women as I go,
I will toss a new gladness and roughness among them,
Whoever denies me it shall not trouble me,
Whoever accepts me he or she shall be blessed and shall bless me.

6

Now if a thousand perfect men were to appear it would not amaze me,
Now if a thousand beautiful forms of women appear'd it would not astonish me..
Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons,
It is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth.
Here a great personal deed has room,
(Such a deed seizes upon the hearts of the whole race of men,
Its effusion of strength and will overwhelms law and mocks all authority and all arguments against it.)
Here is the test of wisdom,
Wisdom is not finally tested in schools,
Wisdom cannot be pass'd from one having it to another not having it,
Wisdom is of the soul, is not susceptible of proof, is its own proof,
Applies to all stages and objects and qualities and is content,
Is the certainty of the reality and immortality of things, and the excellence of things :
Something there is in the float of the sight of things that provokes it out of the soul.
Now I re-examine philosophies and religions,
They may prove well in lecture-rooms, yet not prove at all under the spacious clouds and along the landscape and flowing currents.
Here is realization,
Here is a man tallied—he realizes here what he has in him,
The past, the future, majesty, love—if they are vacant of you, you are vacant of them.
Only the kernel of every object nourishes ;
Where is he who tears off the husks for you and me ?
Where is he that undoes stratagems and envelopes for you and me ?

Here is adhesiveness, it is not previously fashion'd, it is apropos ;
Do you know that it is as you pass to be loved by strangers ?
Do you know the talk of those turning eye-balls ?

7

Here is the efflux of the soul,
The efflux of the soul comes from within through embower'd gates, ever provoking questions,
These yearnings why are they ? these thoughts in the darkness why are they ?
Why are there men and women that while they are nigh me the sunlight expands my blood ?
Why when they leave me do my pennants of joy sink flat and lank ?
Why are there trees I never walk under but large and melodious thoughts decend upon me ?
(I think they hang there winter and summer on those trees and always drop fruit as I pass ;)
What is it I interchange so suddenly with strangers ?
What with some driver as ride on the seat by his side ?
What with some fisherman drawing his seine by the shore as I walk by and pause ?
What gives me to be free to a woman's and man's good-will ? what gives them to be free to mine ?

8

The efflux of the soul is happiness, here is happiness,
I think it pervades the open air, waiting at all times,
Now it flows unto us, we are rightly charged.
Here rises the fluid and attaching character,
The fluid and attaching character is the freshness and sweetness of man and woman,
(The herbs of the morning sprout no freshness and sweeter every day out of the roots of themselves, than it sprouts fresh and sweet continually out of itself.)
Toward the fluid and attaching character exudes the sweet of the love of young and old,
From it falls distill'd the charm that mocks beauty and attainments,
Toward it heaves the shuddering longing ache of contact.

9

Allons ! whoever you are come travel with me ;
Traveling with me you find what never tries.
The earth never tires,
The earth is rude, silent, incomprehensible at first, Nature is rude and incomprehensible at first,
Be not discouraged, keep, on, there are divine things well envelop'd,

I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell.
Allons ! we must not stop here,
However sweet these laid-up stores, however convenient this dwelling we cannot remain here,
However shelter'd this port and however calm these waters we must not anchor here,
However welcome the hospitality that surrounds us we are permitted to receive it but a little while.

10

Allons ! the inducements shall be greater,
We will sail pathless and wild seas.
We will go where winds blow, waves dash, and the Yankee clipper speeds by under full sail.
Allons ! with power, liberty, the earth, the elements,
Health, defiance, gayety, self-esteem, curiosity ;
Allons ! from all formules !
From your formules, O bat-eyed and materialistic priests.
The stale cadaver blocks up the passage—the burial waits no longer.
Allons ! yet take warning !
He traveling with me needs the best blood, thews, endurance,
None may come to the trail till he or she bring courage and health,
Come not here if you have already spent the best of yourself,
Only those may come who come in sweet and determin'd bodies,
No diseas'd person, no rum-drinker or venereal taint is permitted here,
(I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes
We convince by our presence.)

11

Listen ! I will be honest with you,
I do not offer the old smooth prizes ; but offer rough new prizes,
These are the days that must happen to you :
You shall not heap up what is call'd riches,
You shall scatter with lavish hand all that you earn or achieve,
You but arrive at the city to which you were destin'd you hardly settle yourself to satisfaction before you are call'd by an irresistible call to depart,
You shall be treated to the ironical smiles and mockings of those who remain behind you,
What beckonings of love receive you shall only answer with passionate kisses of parting,
You shall not allow the hold of those who spread their reach'd hands towards you.

12

Allons ! after the great Companions and to belong to them !
They too are on the road— they are the swift and majestic men—they are the greatest women,

Enjoyers of calms of sea and storms of seas,
Sailors of many a ship, walkers of many a mile of land,
Habitues of many distant countries, habitues of far-distant dwellings,
Trusters of men and women, observers of cities, solitary toilers,
Pausers and contemplators of tufts, blossoms, shells of the shore,
Dancers at wedding-dances, kissers of brides, tender helpers of children, bearers of children,
Soldiers of revolts, slanders by gaping graves, lowerers-down of coffins,
Journeyers over consecutive seasons, over the years, the curious years each emerging from that which preceded it,
Journeyers as with companions, namely their own diverse phases,
Forth-steppers from the latent unrealized baby-days,
Journeyers gayly with their own youth, journeyers with their bearded and well-grain'd manhood,
Journeyers with their womanhood, ample, unsurpass'd, content,
Journeyers with their own sublime old age of manhood or womanhood,
Old age, calm, expanded, broad with the haughty breath of the universe,
Old age, flowing free with the delicious near-by freedom of death.

13

Allons ! to that which is endless as it was beginningless,
To undergo much, tramps of days, rests of nights,
To merge all in the travel they tend to, and the days and nights they tend to,
Again to merge them in the start of superior journeys,
To see nothing anywhere but what you may reach it and pass it,
To conceive no time, however distant, but what you may reach it and pass it,
To look up or down no road but it stretches and waits for you however long but it stretches and waits for you,
To see no being, not God's or any, but you also go thither,
To see no possession but you may possess it, enjoying all without labor or purchase, abstracting the feast yet not abstracting one particle of it,
To take the best of the former's farm and the rich man's elegant villa, and the chaste blessings of the well-married couple, and the fruits of orchards and flowers of gardens,
To take to your use out of the compact cities as you pass through,
To carry buildings and streets with you afterward wherever you go,
To gather the minds of men out of their brains as you encounter them, to gather the love out of their hearts,
To take your lovers on the road with you, for all that you leave them behind you,
To know the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling souls.
All parts away for the progress of souls,

All religions, all solid things, arts, governments—all that was or is apparent upon this globe or any globe, falls into niches and corners before procession of souls along the grand roads of the universe.

Of the progress of the souls of men and women along the grand roads of the universe, all other progress is the needed emblem and sustenance.

Forever alive, forever forward,
Stately, solemn, sad, withdrawn, baffled, mad, turbulent, feeble, dissatisfied,
Desperate, proud, fond, sick, accepted by men, rejected by men,
They go ! they go ! I know that they go, but I know not where they go,
But I know that they go toward the best—toward something great.
Whoever you are, come forth ! or man or woman come forth !
You must not stay sleeping and dallying there in the house, though you built it, or though it has been built for you.
Out of the dark confinement ! out from behind the screen !
It is useless to protest ; I know all and expose it.
Behold through you as bad as the rest,
Through the laughter, dancing dining, supping, of people,
Inside of dresses and ornaments, inside of those wash'd and trimm'd faces,
Behold a secret silent loathing and despair.
No husband, no wife, no friend, trusted to hear the confession,
Another self, a duplicate of every one, skulking and hiding it goes,
Formless and wordless through the streets of the cities, polite and bland in the parlors,
In the cars of railroads, in steamboats, in the public assembly,
Home to the houses of men and women, at the table, in the bedroom, everywhere,
Smartly attired, countenance smiling, form upright, death under the breast-bones, hell under the skull-bones,
Under the broadcloth and gloves, under the ribbons and artificial flowers ;
Keeping fair with the customs, speaking not a syllable of itself,
Speaking of any thing else but never of itself.

14

Allons ! through struggles and wars !
The goal that was named cannot be countermanded.
Have the past struggles succeeded ?
What has succeeded ? yourself ? your nation ? Nature ?
Now understand me well—it is provided in the essence of things that from any fruition of success, no matter what, shall come forth something to make a greater struggle necessary.
My call is the call of battle, I nourish active rebellion,
He going with me must go well arm'd,
He going with me goes often with spare diet, poverty, angry enemies, desertions.

15

Allons! the road is before us!
It is safe—I have tried it—my own feet have tried it well—be not detain'd!
Let the paper remain on the desk unwritten, and the book on the shelf unopen'd!
Let the tools remain in the workshop! let the money remain unearn'd!
Let the school stand! mind not the cry of the teacher!
Let the preacher preach in his pulpit! let the lawyer plead in the court, and the judge expound the law.

Camerado, I give you my hand!
I give you my love more precious than money,
I give you myself before Preaching or law;
Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The theme of this poem is a journey which the poet undertakes along the open road, a journey which is symbolic of an exploration of the spiritual as well as the physical universe.

In Section 1, the poet, taking to the open road, expresses his acceptance of the universe as it is. He will not complain, and he needs nothing : "Strong and content, I travel the open road."

In Section 2, the poet expresses his acceptance of all categories of people. All are dear to him—the black, the felon, the diseased, the illiterate, the eloping couple, etc. This Section is one of the many passages in Whitman's poetry showing his all-embracing humanity and his wide democratic outlook.

In Section 3, the poet expresses his awareness not only of the visible objects around him but also of the "unseen existences." He addresses a series of objects—ferries, wharves, ships, houses, roofs, porches, windows, doors, pavements, etc.—and discovers a kinship between himself and them.

In Section 4, the poet expresses his love for the public road and feels that the road expresses him better than he can express himself. All heroic deeds and all great poems were conceived in the open air. The poet himself could "do miracles" on the open road. He believes that he will like everybody he meets on the road and that everybody he meets will like him. Further-more, whosoever, he meets on the road "must be happy." This Section again shows the democratic and humanitarian outlook of the poet, and his optimistic faith.

In Section 5, the poet claims unlimited freedom of movement for himself. He will go wherever he wants to go. He will be his own master, total and absolute. He claims to be much larger and better than he had thought himself to be. He finds more goodness in himself than he had previously believed he possessed. All things and all people, and he would do much good to them. This Section, apart from emphasising the poet's optimism and his faith in humanity shows his essential egotism :

> I am larger, better than I thought ;
> I did not know I held so much goodness.

In Section 6, the poet expresses his belief that the best persons are those who grow in the open air, and who eat and sleep with the earth, and then goes on to make a few observations on the nature of wisdom. Wisdom is not something that is finally tested in schools. It is not something that can be handed over by one man to another. Wisdom is of the soul, and it is "the certainty of the reality and immortality of things, and the excellence of things". Philosophies and religions may be valid in class-rooms, but may not be found valid in the open air. It is in the open air that a man realises what he has in him. It is a great thing for a man, as he travels along the open road, to be looked at and loved by strangers.

In Section 7, the poet tries to probe the nature of the happiness that he experiences as he mingles with men and women, or as he walks under the trees. He feels an instinctive affection for stranger—some driver or some fisherman or anybody else.

Section 8 expresses the idea that "the efflux of the soul is happiness" which pervades the open air at all times. It is in the open air that "the fluid and attaching character" rises. The fluid and attaching character is the freshness and sweetness of man and woman.

In Section 9, the poet invites the reader or the imaginary listener to join him in his travel along the open road. There are divine things on this earth, and they are more beautiful than words can tell. The poet and his (imaginary) companion must not stop at one place, but go on.

In Section 10, the poet rejects all the formulas of the semi-blind and materialistic priests. He who wishes to travel with the poet must have courage and endurance. He will not accept any diseased person as his companion : "no rum-drinker or venereal taint is permitted here." The poet and his companion do not believe in arguments, similes, and rhymes. They convince by their presence.

In Section 11, the poet calls upon his companion not to expect "the old smooth prizes", not to accumulate riches, not to be tempted to stay at one place.

Section 12 contains a catalogue of the various kinds of companions with whom the poet will travel along the open road—"committer of crimes, committers of many beautiful virtues", "enjoyers of claims of seas, and storms of seas", "sailors of many a ship", "walkers of many a mile of land", "dancers at wedding dances", "soldiers of revolts", etc.

Section 13 describes the various kinds of experiences that a traveller along the open road is likely to go through. The road is a long one ; it stretches and waits for the travellers. The travellers may take their lovers on the road, but after a time they have to leave them behind. The traveller along the open road realises that the universe itself is a road for travelling souls. As the procession of souls progresses along the grand roads of the universe, all religions, all arts, all governments seem meaningless. The procession of souls goes on moving forward, in spite of difficulties and disappointments, toward a noble destination. Let others come out of their houses and join this procession. Laughing, dancing, dining, beautiful dresses and ornaments are only superficial attraction, and all the smiles and merriment are a mere pose.

In Section 14, the poet tells his listeners that his call is the call of the battle because he believes in active rebellion. He who goes with the poet must go well-armed and must be prepared to face starvation, poverty, enemies, desertions. Any little success, achieved after a struggle, makes a yet greater struggle necessary.

In the concluding Section 15, the poet asks his would-be companion to join him without delay and not to allow anything—the unwritten paper on the desk, the tools in the workshop, the thought of money to be earned, the preaching of the preacher—to delay his departure. The poet offers his love and himself to his would-be companion, and ends the poem by asking his would-be companion the following questions :

> Will you give me yourself ? Will you come travel with me ?
> Shall we stick by each other as long as we live ?

27

This Compost

(First published in 1856)

I. TEXT

1

Something startles me where I thought I was safest,
I withdraw from the still woods I loved,
I will not go now on the pastures to walk,
I will not strip the clothes from my body to meet my lover the sea,
I will not touch my flesh to the earth as to other flesh to renew me.

O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken ?
How can you be alive, you growths of spring ?
How can you furnish health you blood of herbs, roots, orchards, grain ?
Are they not continually putting distemper'd corpses within you ?
Is not every continent work'd over and over with sour dead ?

Where have you disposed of their carcasses ?
Those drunkards and gluttons of so many generations ?
Where have you drawn off all the foul liquid and meat ?
I do not see any of it upon you to-day, or perhaps I am deceiv'd,
I will run a furrow with my plough, I will press my spade through the sod and turn it up underneath,
I am sure I shall expose some of the foul meat.

2

Behold this compost ! behold it well !
Perhaps every mite has once form'd part of a sick person—yet behold !
The grass of spring covers the prairies,
The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden,
The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward,
The apple-buds cluster together on the apple-branches,
The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out of its graves,
The tinge awakes over the willow-tree and the mulberry-tree,

The he-birds carol mornings and evenings while the she-birds sit on their nests,
The young of poultry break through the hatch'd eggs,
The new-born of animals appear, the calf is dropt from the cow, the colt from the mare,
Out of its little hill faithfully rise the potato's dark green leaves,
Out of its hill rises the yellow maize-stalk, the lilacs bloom in the door-yards,
The summer growth is innocent and disdainful above all those strata of sour dead.

What chemistry !
That the winds are really not infectious,
That this is no cheat, this transparent green-wash of the sea which is so amorous after me,
That it is safe to allow it to lick my naked body all over with its tongues,
That it will not endanger me with the fevers that have deposited themselves in it.
That all is clean forever and forever,
That the cool drink from the well tastes so good,
That blackberries are so flavorous and juicy,
That the fruits of the apple-orchard and the orange-orchard, that melons, grapes, peaches, plums, will none of them poison me,
That when I recline on the grass I do not catch any disease,
Though probably every spear of grass rises out of what was once a catching disease.

Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,
It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,
It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless successions of diseas'd corpses,
It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,
It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops,
It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This poem expresses Whitman's sense of wonder at the process of renewal, rejuvenation, and re-birth in Nature. In spite of the fact that numerous dead bodies are buried in the earth every day and that so much filth and garbage are thrown over the earth, the earth yet produces lovely and marvellous growth of many kinds. How is it that the ground itself does not sicken when countless corpses are constantly buried in it ? the poet asks. Addressing the fresh growth on the earth, he says :

> How can you be alive you growths of spring ?
> How can you furnish health you blood of herbs, roots, orchards, grain ?

> Are they not continually putting distemper'd corpses
> within you ?
> Is not every continent work'd over and over with sour
> dead ?

We then get a catalogue of the marvellous kinds of growth that appear on the earth and the healthy, refreshing processes of Nature which are surprising in their abundance, fertility, and variety. "The grass of spring", says the poet, "covers the prairies." "The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden." "The delicate spear of the onion" makes its appearance above the earth. The apple-buds grow on apple trees in clusters. The yellow ears of corn are yet another sign of the fertility of Nature. Then there are the birds singing and settling down on their nests, the young chickens forcing their way out of the hatched eggs, the new-born of animals joining the living creatures of the world. The lilacs bloom in the door-yards :

> The he-birds carol mornings and evenings while the she-
> birds sit on their nests,
> The young of poultry break through the hatch'd eggs,
> The new-born of animals appear, the calf is dropt from
> the cow, the colt from the mare,
> Out of its little hill faithfully rise the potato's dark green
> leaves,
> Out of its hill rises the yellow maize-stalk, the lilacs
> bloom in the door-yards,
> The summer growth is innocent and disdainful above all
> those strata of sour dead.

The sights and the phenomena enumerated here are common, almost commonplace, but the author throws an air of enchantment over them. He succeeds in making us realise how marvellous are all those natural processes to which we have become so accustomed as almost to ignore them. As for the catalogue of natural wonders in this poem we should remember that Whitman's poetry is full of catalogues of various kinds. "Whitman's famous catalogues are in reality brief or extended imagist poems. Image follows image in such pell-mell rush that the reader, glutted with the concrete, pants for a generalization."

What astonishes the poet is the fact that all this beauty should come out of foulness and filth. What "chemistry" is involved in this metamorphosis ? Is it not wonderful that the winds that blow on the earth are not infectious in spite of all the dirt and the poison which we spread in the world, that the water of the sea is so transparent and so clean that we may bathe in it without any fear of endangering our health in spite of the fact that the waters flowing into the sea contain many impurities ? Is it not wonderful that the water from a well tastes so good, that black-berries are so "flavorous and juicy", that the fruit of the apple-orchard and the orange-orchard are so delicious and healthful that we catch no disease when we lie down on the grass although the grass rises out of what was once dirty and foul.

The poet, indeed, feels "terrified" to see the beautiful and health-giving things that grow from what was once poisonous and foul. It is something stunning to see the earth producing "such sweet things out of such corruptions" and "distilling such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor." And the poet thus sums up the [illegible] the earth performs :

> It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual,
> sumptuous crops,
> It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such
> leavings from them at last.

The earth gives wonderful things to man, but man can only give dirt and filth in return.

We might regard this as an almost religious poem. Religion teaches us to feel grateful to God, the Creator, for the blessings that He has showered upon us. Whitman here gives us a catalogue of those blessings, though he does not mention God. But after reading the catalogue provided by him, it is impossible not to think of the Creator. Indeed, the sense of wonder which the poet evokes inevitably makes us turn towards God and bow our heads in gratitude to Him. The sense of wonder is aroused by such lines as : "Behold this compost ! behold it well !" and "What chemistry !" The poem stimulates us to think till even the non-believers among us begin to believe in the divine origin of the universe, and in the divine power that operates incessantly to keep the universe going.

The Compost should be regarded as one of the greater poems of Whitman. It gives us something to think about. It sharpens our awareness of the things which we have begun to take for granted. It gives us pictures of beauty, health, and freshness. A part of its imagery is richly sensuous and, therefore, very pleasing. Finally, it shows a felicity of word and phrase in the expression of the poet's feelings and in the description of natural phenomena.

Says a critic : "In the poem called *This Compost* (published in 1856), Whitman was seized with a wonder verging on terror at the capacity of Nature and of man to produce the beautiful out of the foul or shameful ; here (In *A Hand-Mirror*, published in 1860), he is smitten with the dreadful conviction of having, in his own being, produced the foul and the shameful out of the potentially beautiful."

The same critic tells us that the period, in which *A Hand-Mirror* was written, was one of melancholy and sadness for Whitman. In the first place, Whitman was politically disenchanted at this time. The choice of of 1856 appeared to Whitman to be unfortunate. Secondly, Whitman had, according to several biographers, a homo-sexual love-affair which, when it ended, left him with a sense of profound guilt and at the same time a sense of profound loss. Not only *A Hand-Mirror* but the poem called *Hours Continuing Long, Sore And Heavy-Hearted* (afterwards suppressed by Whitman) testifies both to Whiman's sense of guilt and to his subsequent misery of loneliness.

28

Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking

(First published in 1859)

I. TEXT

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,
Out of the Ninth-month midnight,
Over the sterile sands and the fields beyond, where the child leaving his bed wander'd alone, bareheaded, barefoot,
Down from the shower'd halo,
Up from the mystic play of shadows twining and twisting as if they were alive,
Out from the patches of briers and blackberries,
From the memories of the bird that chanted to me,
From your memories sad brother, from the fitful risings and fallings I heard,
From under that yellow half-moon late risen and swollen as if with tears,
From those beginning notes of yearning and love there in the mist,
From the thousand responses of my heart never to cease.
From the myriad thence-arous'd words,
From the word stronger and more delicious than any,
From such as now they start the scene revisiting,
As a flock, twittering, rising, or overhead passing,
Borne hither, ere all eludes me, hurriedly,
A man, yet by these tears a little boy again,
Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves,
I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,
Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them,
A reminiscence sing.

Once Paumanok,
When the lilac-scent was in the air and Fifth-month grass was growing.
Up this seashore in some briers,
Two feather'd guests from Alabama, two together,
And their nest, and four light-green eggs spotted with brown,
And every day the he-bird to and fro near at hand.

And every day the she-bird crouch'd on her nest, silent, with bright
eyes,
And every day I, a curious boy, never too close, never disturbing
them,
Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating.

Shine ! shine ! shine !
Pour down your warmth, great sun !
While we bask, we two together.

Two together !
Winds blow south, or winds blow north,
Day come white, or night come black,
Home, or rivers and mountains from home,
Singing all time, minding no time,
While we two keep together.

Till of a sudden,
May-be kill'd, unknown to her mate,
One forenoon the she-bird crouch'd not on the nest,
Nor return'd that afternoon, nor the next
Nor even appear'd again.

And thenceforward all summer in the sound of the sea,
And at night under the full of the moon in calmer weather,
Over the hoarse surging of the sea,
Or flitting from brier to brier by day,
I saw, I heard at intervals the remaining one, the he-bird,
The solitary guest from Alabama.

Blow ! blow ! blow !
Blow up sea-winds along Paumanok's shore ;
I wait and I wait till you blow my mate to me.

Yes, when the stars glisten'd,
All night long on the prong of a moss-scallop'd stake,
Down almost amid the slapping waves,
Sat the lone singer wonderful causing tears.

He call'd on his mate,
He pour'd forth the meanings which I of all men know.
Yes my brother, I know,
The rest might not, but I have treasur'd every note,
For more than once dimly down to the beach gliding,
Silent, avoiding the moonbeams, blending myself with the shadows,
Recalling now the obscure shapes, the echoes, the sounds and sights
after their sorts,
The white arms out in the breakers tirelessly tossing,
I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting my hair,
Listen'd long and long.

Listen'd to keep, to sing, now translating the notes,
Following you my brother.

Soothe ! soothe ! soothe !

Close on its wave soothe the wave behind,
And again another behind embracing and lapping, every one close,
But my love soothes not me, not me.

Low hangs the moon, it rose late,
It is lagging—O I think it is heavy with love, with love.

O madly the sea pushes upon the land,
With love, with love.

O night ! do I not see my love fluttering out among the breakers ?
What is that little black thing I see there in the white ?
Loud ! loud ! loud !
Loud I call to you, my love !

High and clear I shoot my voice over the waves,
Surely you must know who is here, is here,
You must know who I am, my love.

Low-hanging moon !
What is that dusky spot in your brown yellow ?
O it is the shape, the shape of my mate !
O moon do not keep her from me any longer.

Land ! land ! O land !
Whichever way I turn, O I think you could give me my mate back again if you only would,
For I am almost sure I see her dimly whichever way I look.

O rising stars !
Perhaps the one I want so much will rise, will rise with some of you

O throat ! O trembling throat !
Sound clearer through the atmosphere !
Pierce the woods, the earth,
Somewhere listening to catch you must be the one I want.

Shake out carols !
Solitary here, the night's carols !
Carols of lonesome love ! death's carols !
Carols under that lagging, yellow, waning moon !
O under that moon where she droops almost down into the sea !
O reckless despairing carols.

But soft ! sink low !
Soft ! let me just murmur,
And do you wait a moment you husky-nois'd sea,
For somewhere I believe I heard my mate responding to me,
So faint, I must be still, be still to listen,
But not altogether still, for then she might not come immediately to me.

Hither my love !
Here I am ! here !
With this just-sustain'd note, I announce myself to you,
This gentle call is for you my love, for you.

Do not be decoy'd elsewhere,

That is the whistle of the wind, it is not my voice,
That is the fluttering, the fluttering of the spray,
Those are the shadows of leaves.

O darkness ! O in vain !
O I am very sick and sorrowful.
O brown halo in the sky near the moon, dropping upon the sea !

O troubled reflection in the sea !
O throat ! O throbbing heart !
And I singing uselessly, uselessly, all the night.

O past ! O happy life ! O songs of joy !
In the air, in the woods, over fields,
Loved ! loved ! loved ! loved ! loved !
But my mate no more, no more with me !
We two together no more.

The aria sinking,
All else continuing, the stars shining,
The winds blowing, the notes of the bird continuous echoing,
With angry moans the fierce old mother incessantly moaning,
On the sands of Paumanok's shore gray and rustling,
The yellow half-moon enlarged, sagging down, drooping, the face of the sea almost touching,
The boy ecstatic, with his bare feet the waves, with his hair the atmosphere dallying,
The love in the heart long pent, now loose, now at last tumultuously bursting.

The aria's meaning, the ears, the soul, swiftly depositing.
The strange tears down the cheeks coursing,
The colloquy there, the trio, each uttering,
The undertone, the savage old mother incessantly crying,
To the boy's soul's questions sullenly timing, some drown'd secret hissing,
To the outsetting bard.

Demon or bird ! (said the boy's soul,)
Is it indeed toward your mate you sing ? or is it really to me ?
For I, that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping, now I have heard you,
Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,
And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer, louder and more sorrowful than yours,
A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die.

O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me,
O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease perpetuating you,
Never more shall I escape, never more the reverberations,
Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me.
Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before what there in the night,
By the sea under the yellow and sagging moon,

The messenger there arous'd, the fire, the sweet hell within,
The unknown want, the destiny of me.

O give me the clew ! (it lurks in the night here somewhere.)
O if I am to have so much, let me have more !
A word then, (for I will conquer it,)
The word final, superior to all,
Subtle, sent up—what is it ?—I listen ;

Are you whispering it, and have been all the time, you sea-waves ?
Is that it from your liquid rims and wet sands ?

Whereto answering, the sea,
Delaying not, hurrying not,
Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before day-break,
Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death,
And again death, death, death, death,
Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous'd child's
heart,
But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,
Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over,
Death, death, death, death, death.

Which I do not forget,
But fuse the song of my dusky demon and brother,
That he sang to me in the moonlight on Paumanok's gray beach,
With the thousand responsive songs at random,
My own songs awaked from that hour,
And with them the key, the word up from the waves,
The word of the sweetest song and all songs,
That strong and delicious word which, creeping to my feet,
(Or like some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet
garments, bending aside,)
The sea whisper'd me.

Whitman

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This is regarded as one of Whitman's best poems. Written in 1858, it was originally published under the title "A Child's Reminiscence", the introductory section, consisting of the first 22 lines, being labelled "Pre-Verse", and the rest of the poem labelled "Reminiscence." In 1860 the poet changed the title to "A Word Out of the Sea" and in 1871 to "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking". The different titles given to the poem at different times create an uncertainty in our minds. We cannot be sure whether the poem was intended simply as "a child's reminiscence" or symbolically as "a word out of the sea". The word "cradle" is highly suggestive ; it is suggestive of motion, but it is suggestive also of life—young life, and, therefore, birth. The word "Death" whispered by the sea is the same as emerges out of the endless rocking of the cradle.

Critics are not certain whether the poem is based on a "real" experience. Many of them believe that the poem is an elegy, that someone, whom the poet had loved, died and that this poem is an allegorical treatment of that sad incident. The wail of the mocking-bird might have been heard by Whitman in his boyhood. The death of the female mocking-bird is employed by the poet as a symbol of the stern fact of death in all nature.

The Prologue or the introductory section (Lines 1—22) consists of one long, winding sentence, with the subject stated in line 20 ("I, chanter of pains and joys......"), and the predicate and object in line 22 ("The reminiscence sing"), which taken together would read thus : "I sing the reminiscence" ; after which the reminiscence begins with line 23.

Lines 23-31 contain a picture of the two birds, their nest, and their eggs. Lines 32-40 contain the merry song of the birds, Lines 41-51 contain the tragedy—the death of the female bird. Lines 52-54 depict the malebird vainly waiting for the female bird. Lines 55-70 describe the reaction of the poet as a boy to the situation created by the death of the female bird and by the male bird's waiting vainly for its return. Lines 71-129 contain the pathetic lament of the male bird. In line 130, the song or the lament of the bird is called an "aria", and in lines 131-44 we get a series of pictures. (An aria is an elaborate melody sung to instrumental music in operas). The poet imagines that the bird is singing an "aria" to the accompaniment of the ocean music. In lines 147-49, the boy tells us that, when he was listening to the bird's song, he became aware of "a thousand songs a thousand warbling echoes" having "started to life within him never to die." In line 150, the boy imagines that the bird, through its songs, is projecting him and then asks for a "clew". In reply to the boys's question, the sea whispers "the low and delicious word death". The clew has come from the sea which is rocking the cradle like 'some old crone". Having got the clew, the boy is transported into manhood and into poet-hood. This is the real theme of the poem, how the boy became a man and a poet.

"The drama of the mocking-birds singing happily together, and then the lament of the he-bird for his lost mate, do not provide the main tension of the poem. The major suspense is created by the boy's longing to understand the meaning of the tragedy—meaning of the death—and the answer comes not from the grieving mate but from the sea, the old crone rocking her cradle. The illumination transports the boy into manhood and endows him with the gift of song. Death is now a delicious word to him, and henceforth in his poems he will be (as stated in the Prologue—lines 1-22) a "uniter of here and here-after." Many biographers and critics have interpreted this poem as an elegy, but the theme stated in the Prologue and repeated in the conclusion is not the poet's reconciliation to the loss of a loved one but how the boy became a man and a poet."

The clew which the boy seeks comes not from the bird but from the sea, the "old crone rocking her cradle." The sea thus may be taken as symbolising the principle of eternity, that is, the principle of birth and life. The sea, the mother, whispers "death," but as the sea is also regarded as rocking the cradle, death here also implies a natural transition to re-birth. Or, the meaning of the poem may be stated thus : "Life and death are not the beginning and end, but rather ceaseless continuations. Death is birth into spiritual life. The sea, as it sends its waves unceasingly to the shore, is the cradle 'endlessly rocking' just as the spiritual world, through the mystic experience of death, provides the cradle for man's spiritual birth. The poem ends, therefore, on a note of hope and faith and not despair.

(According to another interpretation, the "clew" is provided not by the sea but rather by the sea-shore, by the sea and the land jointly. Liquid rims and wet sands" (line 164) suggest the land and sea meeting each other, or symbolically the meeting of the physical and the spiritual).

"In *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, the adult makes a poem which is his means to understanding a childhood experience. The firm control in the poem is managed through the manipulation of this double point-of-view. Initially we are told of the range of experiences out of which this poem comes : the song of the bird, the place, the time, the memory of the dead brother, and as yet unnamed 'word stronger and more delicious than any' which gathers unto itself the meaning of the whole : this is an introductory over-view. Then we are presented with the story of the birds, the loss of the beloved, and the song sung to objectify this loss and perhaps make it bearable. Always we are aware that the poet-as-adult, the creative centre of the poem, seeks the 'word stronger and more delicious' which will be his means finally to understand his reminiscences. The points of view of the child and adult are kept separate until passage which reads :

> Demon or bird ! (said the boy's soul,)
> It is indeed toward your mate you siug ? or is it really to me ?
> For I, that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping, now I have heard you,
> Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,
> And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer, louder and more sorrowful than yours,
> A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die.

Here the points of view are hypnotically merged. In the 'boy's soul' the poet discovers a child's potentialities for adult knowledge. Having discovered the potentiality, he can work towards its realisation, confident that the one will follow automatically from the other. He asks for 'the clew', the word final, superior to all', which will once and for all precipitate the meaning he has willed himself to create. And it comes as he recalls that time when the sea, manifesting the rhythm of life and death itself.

Delaying not hurrying not
Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before
daybreak,
Lisp'd to me the low and delicious ward death,
And again death, death, death, death.........

The merging of the points of view occurs as not only past and present, child and adult, but subject and object (that is, The sea...... whisper'd me—not 'to me') are fused. The poet now knows the word, because he has contrived a situation in which he can control its use, having first re-created himself as both boy and man, and having then fused the two-phases of his life into one. If the end of the poem is to understand cosmic process as a continual loss of the beloved through death and a consequent gain of a positive sense of life-in-death and death-in-life— if this is the end of the poem, nonetheless it is an end gained through a creative act, an assertion of life in the face of death. The act is that of the very person, the poet whom death would deprive of all that is beloved in life."

Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking is typical of those poems of Whitman we tend most to admire, the other chief example being *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd.* Most of all, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* is structurally typical of such poems. The structure is one of relationship, in which the poet, through his control of two or more points of view, manages to pull his words together. Yet the relationship is of a particularly limited sort. The points of view are always aspects of the poet's creative self and are manipulated as such ; they are in no sense dramatic, much less novelistic.

Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking and *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd* have an elegiac note which is the nearest Whitman ever gets to the Tennysonian or Victorian elegiac note, but this note is different in all sorts of ways—especially in its sense of time, of space, of other people. There is that extraordinary picture of Lincoln's coffin passing through the country and little groups of people watching it—for a moment we are projected into that group of people, and out again—and running right through are the great symbols of the lilac and the bird. There is a dialectic working itself out in his best poems, particularly *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd.*

Bloom'd

29

A Woman Waits for Me

(First published in 1856)

I. TEXT

A WOMAN waits for me, she contains all, nothing is lacking,
Yet all were lacking if sex were lacking, or if the moisture of the right man were lacking.

Sex contains all, bodies, souls,
Meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies, results, promulgations,
Songs, commands, health, pride, the maternal mystery, the seminal milk,
All hopes, benefactions, bestowals, all the passions, loves, beauties, delights of the earth,
All the governments, judges, gods, follow'd persons of the earth,
These are contain'd in sex as parts of itself and justifications of itself,

Without shame the man I like knows and avows the deliciousness of his sex,
Without shame the man I like knows and avows hers.

Now I will dismiss myself from impassive women,
I will go stay with her who waits for me, and with those women that are warm-blooded and sufficient for me.

I see that they understand me and do not deny me,
I see that they are worthy of me, I will be the robust husband of those women.

They are not one jot less than I am,
They are tann'd in the face by shining suns and blowing winds,
Their flesh has the old divine suppleness and strength,
They know how to swim, row, ride, wrestle, shoot, run, strike, retreat, advance, resist, defend themselves,
They are ultimate in their own right—they are calm, clear, well-possess'd of themselves.

I draw you close to me, you women,
I cannot let you go, I would do you good,
I am for you, and you are for me, not only for our own sake, but for others' sakes,

Envelop'd in you sleep greater heroes and bards,
They refuse to awake at the touch of any man but me.
It is I, you women, I make my way.
I am stern, acrid, large, undissuadable, but I love you,
I do not hurt you any more than is necessary for you,
I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for these States, I press with slow rude muscle,
I brace myself effectually, I listen to no entreaties,
I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so long accumulated within me.

Through you I drain the pent-up rivers of myself,
In you I wrap a thousand onward years,
On you I graft the grafts of the best-beloved of me and America,
The drops I distil upon you shall grow fierce and athletic girls, new artists, musicians, and singers,
The babes I beget upon you are to beget babes in their turn,
I shall demand perfect men and women out of my love-spendings,
I shall expect them to interpenetrate with others, as I and you interpenetrate now,
I shall count on the fruits of the gushing showers of them, as I count on the fruits of the gushing showers I give now,
I shall look for loving crops from the birth, life, death, immortality, I plant so lovingly now.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This is one of the poems in the group called "Children of Adam."

In his open letter to Emerson, Whitman formally announced what may be called his "sex programme", and he pledged himself to campaign for it. Attacking the legal censorship of the time, he wrote : "By silence or obedience the pens of poets, historians, biographers, and the rest have long connived at the filthy law and books enslaved to it, that which makes the manhood of a man, that sex, womanhood, maternity, desires, lusty animations, organs, acts, are unmentionable and to be ashamed of, to be driven to skulk out of literature with whatever belongs to them. This filthy law has to be repealed—it stands in the way of great reforms. Of woman just as much as men ...there should not be infidelism about sex, but perfect faith. I say that the body of a man or woman, the main matter is so far quite unexpressed in poems ; but that the body is to be expressed, and sex is. Of bards for These States, if it comes to a question, it is whether they shall celebrate in poems the eternal decency of the amativeness of Nature, the motherhood of all, or whether they shall be the bards of the fashionable delusion of the inherent nastiness of sex, and the feeble and the querulous modesty of deprivation." Of the twenty new poems in the 1856 edition of "Leaves of Grass", less than half a dozen came specifically within Whitman's new programme. None surpasses "The Poem of the Body" (the 1956 title for the 1955 poem, later re-titled *I Sing the Body Electric*). *A Woman Waits for Me* (originally called "Poem of Procreation") is more doctrinaire in its theme of "all were lacking, if sex were lacking, or if the moisture of the right man were lacking", but what especially offended many readers in those days was that the woman waiting sounded like a prostitute.

But the sexually aggressive "I" of the poem drains "the pent-up rivers" of himself into abstract "you women" in order "to start sons and daughters fit for These States". He is a symbolical procreator, like the protagonist of *Spontaneous Me*[1], whose sexual hunger is less erotic than the desire to "saturate what shall produce boys to fill my place when I am through." (Thus the after-effect of the symbolical orgasm is a healthy relaxation of tension). And perhaps Whitman was right, as also in his satire "Poem on the Proposition of Nakedness", that anyone who distrusts sex and nakedness will also distrust truth, democracy, love, Nature, and himself.

A Woman Waits for Me is a poem of astonishing candour. Whitman here tries to depict all the natural dignity which he associates with sex, and he dismisses all the shame that society generally associates with sex : "Sex contains all, bodies, souls, meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies,..." There is no reason, he says, for any man or any woman to feel ashamed of sex or the pleasure of sex :

> Without shame the man I like knows and avows the
>   deliciousness of his sex,
> Without shame the woman I like and avows hers.

He will have nothing to do with women who, in the course of the sex experience, are rigid, frigid, or indifferent. He wants women to be warm-hearted and passionate :

> Now I will dismiss myself from impassive women,
> I will go stay with her who waits for me, and with those
>   women that are warm-blooded and sufficient for me,
> I see that they understand me and do not deny me,...

He wants women whose flesh has "the old divine suppleness and strength", and who know "how to swim, row, ride, wrestle, shoot, run, strike,..." In other words, he wants women who have an abundant energy, stamina, vigour, and who are full of self-confidence. He looks upon women as the potential producers of heroes and bards but in order that they may be able to produce such exceptional being, they need the right type of men as begetters. He goes on, without feeling the least embarrassment and without any inhibition, to dwell upon his masculinity and the physical reaction of women to the sex experience. Addressing the women, he says :

> I do not hurt you any more than is necessary for you,
> I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for These
>   States, I press with slow rude muscle,

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[1] *Spontaneous Me* is also one of Whitman's poems in the group called "Children of Adam." See Chapter 6 in this book for a note on this poem.

I brace myself effectually, I listen to no entreaties,
I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so long
accumulated within me.

It is obvious that delicate, frail, or fragile women will not do for him. In lines that are highly egoistical, he claims the power to beget children who will grow into artists, musicians, singers, etc. Addressing women who will receive his seed, he says :

On you I graft the grafts of the best-beloved of me and
America,
The drops I distil upon you shall grow fierce and athletic
girls, new artists, musicians, and singers,...

He hopes that perfect men and women will be born out of his union with the kind of sex-partners he has already defined in the poem, men and women who will "inter-penetrate with others", as he interpenetrates with these partners. Indeed, Whitman leaves nothing unsaid. This amazing frankness must have required in those days an extraordinary kind of courage, and that courage Whitman undoubtedly had, although it shocked many people.

30

Native Moments

(First published in 1860)

I. TEXT

NATIVE moments—when you come upon me—ah you are here now,
Give me now libidinous joys only,
Give me the drench of my passions, give me life coarse and rank,
To-day I go consort with Nature's darlings, to-night too,
I am for those who believe in loose delights, I share the midnight orgies of young men,
I dance with the dancers and drink with the drinkers,
The echoes ring with our indecent calls, I pick out some low person for my dearest friend,
He shall be lawless, rude, illiterate, he shall be one condemn'd by others for deeds done,
I will play a part no longer, why should I exile myself from my companions ?
O you shunned persons, I at least do not shun you,
I come forthwith in your midst, I will be your poet,
I will be more to you than to any of the rest.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This is one of those poems which brought a certain notoriety to Whitman. It is an expression of Whitman's defiance of the moral code of society. The poet here expresses his desire to lead a sensuous ; or sensual, life. He asks the "native moments" to give him "libidinous joys only", that is, sensual pleasures or pleasures of the flesh. He revels in "life coarse and rank." He would like to share "the midnight orgies of young men", to dance with the dancers, to drink with the drinkers, to indulge in indecent talk, to sleep with some prostitute. He would like to associate with some low person, a rude, illiterate man who incurs the disapproval of society. He would like to mix with men whom society shuns. He would be the poet of the out-casts of society.

This is clearly one of those poems which would alienate the author from most readers. The poet here seems to preach a moral lawlessness. The lines where the poet speaks of picking out some low person, lawless, rude, illiterate, seem to show Whitman's homosexual tendencies. As a critic points out, *Native Moments* portrays a natural or spontaneous "Adamic"[1] man in the context of a hostile society, choosing the path of conformity to the Adamic self in preference to the path of conformity to social conventions. Choosing conformity to the natural or spontaneous self, the poet finds himself in conflict with society, consorting with society's outcasts but "Nature's darlings."

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[1] *Adamic man*—Natural man yielding to his natural impulses uncontrolled by any moral code.

31

Once I Pass'd through a Populous City

(First published in 1860)

I. TEXT

ONCE I pass'd through a populous city imprinting my brain for
future use with its shows, architecture, customs, traditions,
Yet now of all that city I remember only a woman I casually met
there who detain'd me for love of me,
Day by day and night by night we were together—all else has long
been forgotten by me,
I remember I say only that woman who passionately clung to me,
Again we wander, we love, we separate again,
Again she holds me by the hand, I must not go,
I see her close beside me with silent lips sad and tremulous.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This poem appeared in the volume called "Children of Adam". The poems of this volume are remarkable for their frankness in matters of sex. It was in this volume that poems like *I Sing the Body Electric* and *A Woman Waits for Me* made their appearance.

In this poem, the writer recalls a passionate amorous experience with a woman whom he met when he passed through a populous city. He did not feel much interested in the "shows, architecture, customs, traditions" of the city. All that he remembers of that city now is the woman whom he casually met there and who detained him because of her love for him. He spent many days and nights with her. She clung to him passionately. This is the memory that stands out in his mind more than anything else. He can even now imagine her "close beside me with silent lips sad and tremulous."

There is nothing remarkable about this poem. Indeed, it is a trifle. All that Whitman is trying to do here is to emphasise the importance of sex with reference to a particular experience. Whitman gives us the feeling that it is not the particular woman who matters for him but the quality of the sexual experience. He does not, for instance, become permanently attached to any woman. It is the degree of sexual satisfaction and the intensity of the sexual experience that are important for him. The orthodox kind of reader would certain disapprove of such an attitude towards love, and would dismiss most of the amorous poems of Whitman as "beastly". But Whitman's approach to love and sex has its own defenders. D. H. Lawrence, it is believed, was greatly influenced by Whitman's approach.

32

A Hand-Mirror

(First published in 1860)

I. TEXT

Hold it up sternly—see this it sends back, (who is it ? is it you ?)
Outside fair costume, within ashes and filth,
No more a flashing eye, no more a sonorous voice or springy step,
Now some slave's eye, voice, hands, step,
A drunkard's breath, unwholesome eater's face, venerealee's flesh,
Lungs rotting away piecemeal, stomach sour and cankerous,
Joints rheumatic, bowels clogged with abomination,
Blood circulating dark and poisonous streams,
Words babble, hearing and touch callous,
No brain, no heart left, no magnetism of sex ;
Such from one look in this looking-glass ere you go hence.
Such a result so soon—and from such a beginning !

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Whitman does not shrink either from sex or from ugliness. He dwells upon both with a frankness which is amazing ; and his treatment of both in a number of poems is shocking to the reader. Here is a poem in which a number of ugly, filthy and disgusting ingredients have been jumbled together. In the second line of this poem, he says : "Outside fair costume, within ashes and filth". And the major portion of this short poem deals with ashes and filth. Here are those ingredients which have been assembled for our perusal : "a drunkard's breath ;" "unwholesome eater's face" ; "venerealee's flesh" ; "lungs rotting away piecemeal" ; "stomach sour and cankerous" ; "joints rheumatic ; " "bowels clogged with abomination" ; "blood circulating dark and poisonous streams......"

Such is the picture of the inside of the man who looks into the hand-mirror : "No brain, no heart left, no magnetism of sex." The poem describes the change from the freshness and health of childhood and youth to the decay, decrepitude, and disease of old age : "Such a result so soon—and from such a beginning."

Here is a comment by an able critic on this poem : "*A Hand-Mirror* records a feeling of self-loathing almost unequalled in English or American poetry. And it is representative of the entire volume[1] in its emphatic reversal of an earlier work and an earlier course of feeling.

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[1] The volume refers to the "Leaves of Grass" (1860 edition).

33

I Hear America Singing

(First published in 1860)

I. TEXT

I HEAR America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deck-hand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon intermisson or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This poem presents an image of America, an image of proud and healthy individualists engaged in productive and happy labour—mechanic, carpenter, mason, boatman, deck-hand, shoe-maker, hatter, wood-cutter, plow-boy. From city to country, from sea to land, the varied carols reflect a genuine joy in the day's creative labour that makes up the essence of the American dream or myth. After the catalogue of the men of various trades and occupations, the poet turns to the woman—the mother, the young wife, the girl, each singing at her labour. All the songs which the men and women sing are songs of spiritual possession, of the possessed individuality. Each of these men and women contributes with their labour to the onward stream of life. America singing emerges as a happy, individualistic, proudly procreative America, with a strong sense of comradeship among its people. Whitman has succeeded in conveying to us the total concept of America through a very brief poem.

34

Whoever You are Holding Me Now in Hand

(First published in 1860)

I. TEXT

WHOEVER you are holding me now in hand,
Without one thing all will be useless,
I give you fair warning before you attempt me further,
I am not what you supposed, but far different.

Who is he that would become my follower ?
Who would sign himself a candidate for my affections ?

The way is suspicious, the result uncertain, perhaps destructive,
You would have to give up all else, I alone would expect to be your
sole and exclusive standard,
Your novitiate would even then be long and exhausting,
The whole past theory of your life and all conformity to the lives
around you would have to be abandon'd,
Therefore release me now before troubling yourself any further, let
go your hand from my shoulders,
Put me down and depart on your way.

Or else by stealth in some wood for trial,
Or back of a rock in the open air,
(For in any roof'd room of a house I emerge not, nor in company,
And in libraries I lie as one dumb, a gawk, or unborn, or dead,)
But just possibly with you on a high hill, first watching lest any
person for miles around approach unawares,
Or possibly with you sailing at sea, or on the beach of the sea or
some quiet island,
Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,
With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss or the new husband's kiss,
For I am the new husband and I am the comrade.

Or if you will, thrusting me beneath your clothing,
Where I may fell the throbs of your heart or rest upon your hip,
Carry me when you go forth over land or sea :
For thus merely touching you is enough, is best;

And thus touching you would I silently sleep and be carried eternally.

But these leaves conning you con at peril,
For these leaves and me you will not understand,
They will elude you at first and still more afterward, I will certainly elude you,
Even while you should think you had unquestionably caught me, behold !
Already you see I have escaped from you.

For it is not for what I have put into it that I have written this book,
Nor is it by reading it you will acquire it,
Nor do those know me best who admire me and vauntingly praise me.
Nor will the candidates for my love (unless at most a very few) prove victorious.
Nor will my poems do good only, they will do just as much evil, perhaps more,
For all is useless without that which you may guess at many times and not hit, that which I hinted at ;
Therefore release me and depart on your way.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This is one of the Calamus poems, and therefore a poem of masculine love or "manly attachment". Like other poems of this group, we have here a dare-devil flouting of convention. Addressing an imaginary man who holds him by the hand, Whitman says that this holding of hands will be useless "without one thing." He is different from his fellows, Whitman tells that man and goes on to ask :

Who is he that would become my follower ?
Who would sign himself a candidate for my affections ?

He warns his prospective love-comrade that the course of their attachment will be "suspicious" and that its result will be "uncertain, perhaps destructive." The would-be comrade would have to give up all else and would have to devote himself completely to the poet. He would have to renounce the whole past theory of his life and all conformity with the lives of other people. Let this would-be friend then reconsider the position when there is still time. If the would-be friend wants a kind of trial, let him accompany the poet into some wood or to the top of a hill, or to the sea-beach, or to some quiet island, where nobody may approach them. And the reader is shocked to find, on reading the following lines, what the poet has in mind in taking his would-be friend "by stealth" to one of these secluded spots :

Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,
With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss or the new husband's kiss,

For I am the new husband and I am the comrade.

The lines that follow are equally unconventional. The poet goes on to say to his would-be comrade :

Or if you will, thrusting me beneath your clothing,
Where I may feel the throbs of your heart or rest upon
your hip,
Carry me when you go forth over land or sea...

Obviously these lines suggest a kind of relationship that is not only odious but revolting to the normal reader. In the concluding passage of this poem Whitman comments upon the kind of verse he writes. With a damning frankness, he says that his poems will not do good only but that "they will do just as much evil, perhaps more and he ends by reminding his would-be friend of what he said in the opening lines, that "all is useless" without that which he has hinted at. If the would-be friend is not agreeable to the kind of relationship suggested, let him release the poet and depart on his way :

For all is useless without that which you may guess at
many times and not hit, that which I hinted at ;
Therefore release me and depart on your way.

35

I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing

(First published in 1860)

I. TEXT

I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing,
All alone stood it and the moss hung down from the branches,
Without any companion it grew there uttering joyous leaves of dark green,
And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of myself,
But I wonder'd how it could utter, joyous leaves standing alone there without its friend near, for I knew I could not,
And I broke off a twig with a certain number of leaves upon it, and twined around it a little moss,
And brought it away, and I have placed it in sight in my room,
(For I believe lately I think of little else than of them,)
Yet it remains to me a curious token, it makes me think of manly love ;
For all that, and though the live-oak glistens there in Louisiana solitary in a wide flat space,
Uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend a lover near,
I know very well I could not.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Here is another poem showing Whitman's love of friends and comrades. He sees a moss-covered oak tree standing and growing alone and bearing its happy load of dark-green leaves, and feels surprised that the oak-tree can thrive without a companion, a friend, a lover. The poet feels that it is not possible for him to emulate the example of the oak-tree. He cannot isolate himself from his friends and cannot live without their love. An oak-tree may lead a solitary life, but a human being cannot. The thought of his friends is constantly in the poet's mind : "For I believe lately I think of little else than of them."

The poem is a brief study in contrast—a contrast between a tree and a human being. The picture of the oak-tree is vividly drawn :

> All alone stood it, and the moss hung down from the
> branches ;

Without any companion it grew there, uttering joyous
leaves of dark green.
And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of
myself.

The expression "uttering joyous leaves" is noteworthy. The leaves growing on the oak-tree are metaphorically regarded here as the joyful speech of the tree. The adjectives "rude", "unbending" and "lusty", says the poet, apply to his own nature as much as to the oak-tree.

36

To a Stranger

(First published in 1860)

I. TEXT

Passing stranger ! you do not know how longingly I look upon
you,
You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (it comes to me
as of a dream,)
I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you,
All is recall'd as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste,
matured,
You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me,
I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not yours
only nor left my body mine only,
You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass, you
take of my beard, breast, hands, in return,
I am not to speak to you, I am to think of you when I sit alone or
wake at night alone,
I am to wait, I do not doubt I am to meet you again,
I am to see to it that I do not lose you.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This poem too belongs to the Calamus group. As the poet looks at a stranger, he is filled with a mysterious longing. Perhaps this is the man the poet has been seeking. It seems to the poet that he has somewhere lived a life of joy with this stranger (who is therefore not a stranger at all). Looking at this "stranger", the poet recalls that the two of them have grown up together since boyhood have eaten together and slept together. As they now pass each other "fluid, affectionate, chaste, matured," the poet experiences a pleasure in looking at the stranger's eyes, face, flesh, and the poet offers to the stranger, in return, the pleasure of his own beard, breast, hands. The poet need not speak to the stranger. He will only think of the stranger when he sits alone or wakes at night alone. He has no doubt that they will meet again. He must not lose one who seems to be a stranger but who is really an old friend with whom he had been very intimate :

……I do not doubt I am to meet you again,
I am to see to it that I do not lose you.

There is a certain vagueness about this poem. It is possible that the "passing stranger" at whom the poet looks "longingly reminds the poet, by a physical resemblance, of someone with whom he has been very intimate in the past: "I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you." But it is also possible that the passing stranger bears a resemblance to, or corresponds to, an imaginary person (a man or, may be a girl) whose image has often visited the poet's mind. Even the sex of the stranger is left undefined and vague: "You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking", and "you grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me."

This, again, is one of those poems of Whitman which are totally insignificant. There is neither anything in the theme nor any quality of language or style that deserves any consideration. How this group of ten lines can be called poetry is difficult to understand. All that the poet seems to be saying on seeing a stranger is: "You are the man (or woman) of my dreams. It seems you and I have lived together before, and I am sure that we shall meet again."

37

I Hear It was Charged against Me

(First published in 1860)

I. TEXT

I HEAR it was charged against me that I sought to destroy institutions,
But really I am neither for nor against institutions,
(What indeed have I in common with them ? or what with the destruction of them ?)
Only I will establish in the Mannahatta and in every city of these States inland and sea-board,
And in the fields and woods, and above every keel little or large that dents the water,
Without edifices or rules or trustees or any argument,
The institution of the dear love of comrades.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This short piece is a declaration by the poet of his resolve to establish what he calls "the institution of the dear love of comrades". Answering the charge that he seeks to destroy institutions, he affirms that he is really neither for nor against institutions. He has nothing in common with institutions and is not concerned with the destruction of them. Only one thing matters in his eyes and that is a feeling of comradeship with others, sense of fellowship with others, a desire for close understanding with others. He proposes to establish in all parts of his country this feeling of comradeship.

The poem shows the writer's deep faith in democracy and in a universal sense of comradeship. It is one of those poems which would naturally endear the writer to the readers. The sentiment expressed here is truly laudable.

A Glimpse

(First published in 1860)

I. TEXT

A GLIMPSE through an interstice caught,
Of a crowd of workmen and drivers in a bar-room around the stove late of a winter night, and I unremark'd seated in a corner,
Of a youth who loves me and whom I love, silently approaching and seating himself near, that he may hold me by the hand,
A long while amid the noises of coming and going, of drinking and oath and smutty jest,
There we two, content, happy in being together, speaking little, perhaps not a word.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This is another poem belonging to the "Calamus" group. The author here gives us a picture of "a crowd of workmen and drivers in a bar-room around the stove late of a winter night," and of himself seated in a corner unobserved. He then describes a young man, who loves the author and whom the author loves, silently approaching and seating himself near the author so that he may hold the author by the hand. The two of them sit there for a long while amid the noises of coming and going, of drinking and oaths, and of the dirty jokes being exchanged by the members of the crowd of workmen to whom a reference has already been made. The author and his friend ("a youth who loves me and whom I love") sit content, "happy in being together, speaking little, perhaps not a word."

This, too, is a poem depicting male comradeship, or "manly attachment". But there is nothing interesting or remarkable in this poem. Accordingly it may be regarded as one of the many trifling poems written by Whitman. It may even be described as a dull and boring poem, without any significant idea or any depth of emotion. As for its style, it reads just like prose, like many other similar poems of Whitman. A great poet as Whitman is, he has written much that is not worth the trouble of reading, though it may be pointed out that the homo-sexual relationship depicted in this poem is part of his view that a human being need not feel ashamed of his body or of the sensual pleasures for which he may feel a craving. This is, of course, an abnormal view which, if allowed to be popularised may lead to moral anarchy and has therefore dangerous potentialities.

39

Earth, My Likeness

(First published in 1860)

I. TEXT

EARTH, my likeness,
Though you look so impassive, ample and spheric there,
I now suspect that is not all ;
I now suspect there is something fierce in you eligible to burst forth,
For an athlete is enamour'd of me, and I of him,
But toward him there is something fierce and terrible in me eligible to burst forth,
I dare not tell it in words, not even in these songs.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Here is yet another poem from the "Calamus" group. Much of what has been said earlier in connection with *A Glimpse*, applies to this poem also.

The poet here looks at the earth and discovers a kind of kinship with it. Though the earth looks "so impassive, ample, and spheric", he suspects that these words do not sum up the whole character of the earth. There is something "fierce" in the earth and it is likely "to burst forth." And then he speaks of an athlete who is enamoured of the poet, and of whom the poet is enamoured too. But the poet's love for this athlete is not mild or gentle or neighbourly ; it is not a brotherly feeling. There is "something fierce and terrible" in the poet's love for him, and this something fierce and terrible is also likely "to burst forth." In other words, there is something volcanic in the poet's feeling for this athlete. However, the poet does not exactly define the nature of this feeling, and says : "I dare not tell it in words, not even in these songs." ("These songs", of course, refer to the "Calamus" poems).

Although the poet has enough decency not to define his feeling in words, what he has in mind is unmistakable. It would be interesting to read the following comment that was made by an anonymous reviewer of the 1855 and 1856 editions of Whitman's "Leaves of Grass", because much of it is, in the opinion of most readers, applicable to the "Calamus" poems : "We are bound in conscience to call it impious and obscene. In point of style, the book is an impertinence towards the English language, and in point of sentiment, an affront upon the recognised mortality of respectable people. Both its language and thought seem to have just broken out of bedlam. It sets off upon a sort of distracted philosophy, and openly deifies the bodily organs, senses, and appetites, in terms that admit of no double sense. To its libidinousness it adds the most ridiculous swell of self-applause......"

(**Note** : The earth frequently appears in Whitman's poetry as a great round globe sailing through the heavens. This perspective serves to project both poet and reader into the universe as cosmic observers witnessing the dramatic progression of the earth, as in this poem. The word "there" in the second line suggests a gesture of pointing by the poet to a globe from which he has somehow cast himself adrift. Curiously enough, it is almost always this independent view of the earth that appears in Whitman's poetry).

40

I Sit and Look Out

(First published in 1860)

I. TEXT

I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and upon all
oppression and shame,
I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men at anguish with themselves, remorseful after deeds done,
I see in low life the mother misused by her children, dying, neglected,
gaunt, desperate,
I see the wife misused by her husband, I see the treacherous seducer
of young women,
I mark the ranklings of jealousy and unrequited love attempted to be
hid, I see these sights on the earth,
I see the workings of battle, pestilence, tyranny, I see martyrs and
prisoners,
I observe a famine at sea, I observe the sailors casting lots who shall
be kill'd to preserve the lives of the rest,
I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons upon
laborers, the poor, and upon negroes, and the like ;
All these—all the meanness and agony without end I sitting look out
upon,
See, hear, and am silent.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This poem appeared in the volume called "By the Roadside". This is one of those poems in which Whitman shows his keen and painful awareness of the evil and suffering in this world. In fact, the poem is a catalogue of the misfortunes that afflict mankind. Whitman is well-known for catalogues of various kinds with which many of his poems are replete. Such catalogues give both variety and breadth to his poetry. He thought nothing too trivial to be excluded from his poetry.

As the poet surveys the human world, he is struck by the number and variety of misfortunes to which mankind is subject and which are the cause of the widespread suffering in the world. He looks upon all the oppression and the shame. He hears young men sobbing secretly in their anguish, the anguish born of their own misdeeds. He sees low-class women ill-treated by their children, feeling desperate, and dying of neglect. He sees the wife ill-treated by her husband. He sees the treacherous seducer of young women. He observes the torments of jealousy and of unrequited love. He sees the baneful effects of war, pestilence, and tyranny. He observes the insults and degradations to which the poor are subjected by the arrogant. In short, he looks at all "the meanness and agony without end." He sees all this, he hears all this but he remains silent. His silence is, of course, due to the profundity of suffering in the world and his own helplessness in the matter.

It is a touching poem, with pathos as its keynote. The poet has compressed in a short poem most of the sufferings of human beings. The realistic imagery of the poem is noteworthy. The style is most simple and lucid. The poem, while it brings before our minds many of the misfortunes of mankind, provides a kind of *Catharsis* also.

41

Poets to Come

(First published in 1860)

I. TEXT

POETS to come ! orators, singers, musicians to come !
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before known,
Arouse ! for you must justify me,

I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future,
I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness.

I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face,
Leaving it to you to prove and define it,
Expecting the main things from you.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This short poem is addressed to the poets and singers of the future. The coming generation of poets, orators, and musicians will be a new breed, greater than those of the previous generations. The writer expects great things from the poets of the future. As for himself, he can only indicate the path of progress but cannot at this stage carry the people along that path. He must leave it to the poets of the future to tread that path and to guide the others to go forward along that path. The writer expects the poets of the future to justify the great hopes he has of the usefulness and fruitfulness of their work.

It is an optimistic poem in which the writer utters a prophecy regarding the noble role that the poets of the future will play.

42

A Noiseless Patient Spider

(First published in 1862-63)

I. TEXT

A NOISELESS patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little premontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.
And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to
connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor
hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The first five lines of this poem contain a picture of a spider, patient, noiseless, and alone, tirelessly launching fourth filament after filament out of itself. In the last five lines, the poet addresses his own soul which, like the spider, stands alone in measureless space, ceaselessly musing. The poet's soul seeks to connect the spheres and the poet hopes that the gossamer thread which his soul flings will "catch somewhere."

What the poet wishes to say is that the soul, a tiny speck of consciousness surrounded by vast oceans of empty space, is searching for faith and spiritual anchorage. "Here is solitude with a vengeance, in a vacancy so vast that any soul seen at its centre, trying to comprehend and inhabit it, looks terribly minute", says a critic in his analysis of this poem. From this critic's point of view, the main subject of the poem is loneliness.

The spider is not only minute in comparison to "the vacant vast surrounding" into which it throws its filament of gossamer thread, but it is also noiseless and patient, adjectives that contribute greatly to the pathos of the situation. When the poet addresses his soul in the last five lines, he magnifies the vast surrounding by employing the phrase "measureless oceans of space." The soul is imagined as seeking anchorage on the "spheres" which again imply vastness.

This is one of Whitman's finest religious lyrics. It is a brilliant affirmation of the need for spiritual love, just as *The Dalliance of the Eagles* affirms the love of the sexes. The vividly dramatised image of the spider in the first five lines leads the poet to make a symbolic application of it to the soul in the next five lines. According to one critic, Whitman in this poem "demonstrates in a very complex and subtle sense the path between reality, his soul, and the reader's soul, and reveals his yearning for the 'gossamer' connection."

43

Chanting the Square Deific

(First published in 1865-66)

I. TEXT

1

CHANTING the square deific, out of the One advancing, out of the sides,
Out of the old and new, out of the square entirely divine,
Solid, four-sided, (all the sides needed), from this side Jehovah am I,
Old Brahm I, and I Saturnius am ;
Not Time affects me—I am Time, old, modern as any,
Unpersuadable, relentless, executing righteous judgements,
As the Earth, the Father, the brown old Kronos, with laws.
Aged beyong computation, yet ever new, ever with those mighty laws rolling,
Relentless I forgive no man—whoever sins dies—I will have that man's life ;
Therefore let none expect mercy—have the seasons gravitation, the appointed days, mercy ? no more have I,
But as the seasons and gravitation and as all the appointed days that forgive not,
I dispense from this side judgments inexorable without the least remorse.

2

Consolator most mild, the promis'd one advancing,
With gentle hand extended, the mightier God-am I,
Foretold by prophets and poets in their most rapt prophecies and poems,
From this side, lo ! the Lord Christ gazes—lo ! Hermes I—lo ! mine is Hercules' face,
All sorrow, labor, suffering, I tallying it, absorb in myself,
Many times have I been rejected, taunted, put in prison, and crucified, and many times shall be again,
All the world have I given up for my dear brothers' and sisters' sake, for the soul's sake,

Wending my way through the homes of men, rich or poor, with the kiss of affection,
For I am affection, I am the cheer-bringing God, with hope and all-enclosing charity,
With indulgent words as to children, with fresh and sane words, mine only,
Young and strong I pass knowing well I am destin'd myself to an early death ;
But my charity has no death—my wisdom dies not, neither early nor late,
And my sweet love bequeath'd here and elsewhere never dies,

3

Aloof, dissatisfied, plotting revolt,
Comrade of criminals, brother of slaves,
Crafty, despised, a drudge, ignorant,
With sudra face and worn brow, black, but in the depths of my heart, proud as any,
Lifted now and always against whoever scorning assumes to rule me,
Morose, full of guile, full of reminiscences, brooding, with many wiles,
(Though it was thought I was baffled and dispel'd, and my wiles done, but that will never be,)
Defiant, I, Satan, still live, still utter words, in new lands duly appearing, (and old ones also,)
Permanent here from my side, warlike, equal with any, real as any,
Nor time nor change shall ever change me or my words.

4

Santa Spirita, breather, life,
Beyond the light, lighter than light,
Beyond the flame of hell, joyous, leaping easily above hell,
Beyond Paradise perfumed solely with mine own perfume,
Including all life on earth, touching, including God, including Saviour and Satan,
Ethereal, pervading all, (for without me what were all ? what were God ?)
Essence of forms, life of the real identities, permanent, positive (namely the unseen,)
Life of the great round world, the sun and stars, and of man, I, the general soul,
Here the square finishing, the solid, I the most solid,
Breathe my breath also through these songs.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

As the title indicates, this is a poem about four deities. The first of these is Jehovah (or Old Brahm, or Saturnius) who remains unaffected by time, who is aged beyond calculation but who is yet ever new. Jehovah is relentless. He executes righteous judgments and forgives no sins. No mercy is to be expected from him just as no mercy can be expected from the seasons and from gravitation.

The second deity is the Consolator. He is a mild and gentle deity foretold by prophets and poets. He has many times been rejected, taunted, put in prison and crucified, and he will have to go through such experiences many times again. The welfare of humanity is his principal aim. He is the cheer-bringing and hope-bringing God whose charity embraces all mankind. All the armies and soldiers of the earth and all the weapons of war have to bow to the spirit of charity and love which he represents

The third deity depicted in the poem is Satan who is described as dissatisfied, rebellious, cunning, a comrade of criminals, proud, and morose. He is permanent and cannot be suppressed. His character is changeless.

The fourth deity is Santa Spirita who is lighter than light, joyous, perfumed solely with his own perfume. He includes all life on earth. He includes God, Christ, Satan. He is the general Soul. He is the life of the great round world, of the sun and stars, and of man.

In this poem, Whitman has defined the nature of the spiritual law. The poem constitutes an insight into the order of the universe. The insight can lead to a faith in death as not an end but a beginning. If Jehovah is law, the Consolator is love, Satan is revolt, then Santa Spirita is the all-pervading unifying element. Santa Spirita is the "general soul" and, in finishing the square, is the "most solid." The poet elevates this fourth side of the square to the position of the greatest eminence. In any universe pervaded and spiritualised by Santa Spirita, death can be no less than a birth into the "life of the real identities." Like many mystics, Whitman comes to the realisation that the true reality is the spiritual—and that what we call the real world is illusion.

44

One's-Self I Sing

(First published in 1867)

I. TEXT

ONE'S-SELF I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse, I say
the Form complete is worthier far,
The Female equally with the Male I sing.

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,
The Modern Man I sing

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

In this short piece, one of the best-known of Whitman's compositions, the poet dwells upon the theme of his poetry. He is the poet of democracy and, although he celebrates a simple, separate individual (himself), he is a believer in the *En-Masse*.

He is the poet of the human body and the human form. The body and the brain should not be regarded as separate or separable entities. The complete human form (comprising both the body and the brain or soul) is the subject of his Muse. The male form and the female form are equally important to him, and he would celebrate both in his poetry. His theme is the "Modern Man" and he would write about all the power, vigour, and passion of the life of the Modern Man who has the right to the utmost freedom of action restrained only by the laws of God.

45

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

(First published in 1865)

I. TEXT

WHEN I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and
measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much
applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

In this poem Whitman seems to contrast the astronomer's scientific approach to the stars and the poet's fanciful approach. The astronomer studies the stars and their movements ; he makes his calculations ; he draws his diagrams and charts ; he arrives at his results ; he publishes his conclusions and he delivers lectures to his audiences on the discoveries that he has made. But the poet is not interested in the analysis, research, and conclusions of the astronomer. The poet feels "tired and sick" of listening to the astronomer's lecture. The poet gets up and moves out of the lecture-hall in order to wander by himself. The poet has his own discoveries to make. He finds a mystical significance in the damp night-air. He looks at the stars and is struck by their beauty and their mystery. He looks at the stars "in perfect silence" wondering at what Byron called "the poetry of heaven."

Here is a comment on this poem : "After hearing the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room, the poet becomes tired and sick and wanders off into the night and looks up in perfect silence at the stars. This simple lyric might suggest that Whitman, like the other romantics, attacked science as an enemy of the imagination. But the attitude of silent observation, of detached contemplation, is a part of the dominant mood and tone of "By the Roadside"[1] (as in *I Sit and Look Out*). And, moreover, Whitman has already expressed complete and unreserved acceptance of science in Section 23 of *Song of Myself*:

> Hurrah for positive science! long live exact demonstration......
> Gentlemen, to you the first honours always!
> Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling,
> I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling.

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer is a dramatisation fulfilling this basic attitude."

It is a pity that scientific advances (including man's landings on the moon) should destroy all the mystery and loveliness which have, from time immemorial, been associated with the stars. In any case, Whitman's poem enables us to recapture, to some extent, the mood in which man used to look at the stars when science had not yet explored their mystery.

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[1] This is the title of another group of poems which include *A Hand-Mirror, Gods, When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer, I Sit and Look Out*, and *The Dalliance of the Eagles*.

46

Pioneers ! O Pioneers !

(First published in 1865)

I. TEXT

Come my tan-faced children,
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,
Have you your pistols ? have you your sharp-edged axes ?
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

For we cannot tarry here,
We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger,
We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

O you youths, Western youths,
So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and friendship,
Plain I see you Western youths, see you tramping with the foremost,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

Have the elder races halted ?
Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas ?
We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

All the past we leave behind,
We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world,
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labour and the march,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

We detachments steady throwing,
Down the edges, through the passes, up the mountains steep,
Conquering, holding, daring, venturing as we go the unknown ways,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

We primeval forests felling,
We the rivers stemming, vexing we and piercing deep the mines within,
We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

Colorado men are we,
From the peaks gigantic, from the great sierras and the high plateaus,
From the mine and from the gully, from the hunting trail we come,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

From Nebraska, from Arkansas,
Central inland race are we, from Missouri, with the continental blood intervein'd,
All the hands of comrades clasping, all the Southern, all the Northern,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

O resistless restless race !
O beloved race in all ! O my breast aches with tender love for all !
O I mourn and yet exult, I am rapt with love for all.
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

Raise the mighty mother mistress,
Waving high the delicate mistress, over all the starry mistress, (bend your heads all,)
Raise the fang'd and warlike mistress, stern, impassive, weapon'd mistress,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

See my children, resolute children,
By those swarms upon our rear we must never yield or falter,
Ages back in ghostly millions frowning there behind us urging,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

On and on the compact ranks,
With accessions ever waiting, with the places of the dead quickly fill'd,
Through the battle, through defeat, moving yet and never stopping
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

O to die advancing on !
Are these some of us to droop and die ? has the hour come ?
Then upon the march we fittest die, soon and sure the gap is fill'd,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

All the pulses of the world,
Falling in they beat for us, with the Western movement beat,
Holding single or together, steady moving to the front, all for us,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

Life's involv'd and varied pageants,
All the forms and shows, all the workmen at their work,
All the seamen and the landsmen, all the masters with their slaves,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

All the hapless silent lovers,
All the prisoners in the prisons, all the righteous and the wicked,
All the joyous, all the sorrowing, all the living, all the dying,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

I too with my soul and body,
We, a curious trio, picking, wandering on our way,
Through these shores amid the shadows, with the apparitions pressing,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

Lo, the darting bowling orb !
Lo, the brother orbs around, all the clustering suns and planets,
All the dazzling days, all the mystic nights with dreams,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

These are of us, they are with us,
All for primal needed work, while the followers there in embryo wait behind,
We to-day's procession heading, we the route for travel clearing,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

O you daughters of the West !
O you young and elder daughters ! O you mothers and you wives !
Never must you be divided, in our ranks you move united,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

Minstrels latent on the prairies !
(Shrouded bards of other lands, you may rest, you have done your work,)
Soon I hear you coming warbling, soon you rise and tramp amid us,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

Not for delectations sweet,
Not the cushion and the slipper, not the peaceful and the studious,
Not the riches safe and palling, not for us the tame enjoyment,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

Do the feasters gluttonous feast ?
Do the corpulent sleepers sleep ? have they lock'd and bolted doors ?
Still be ours the diet hard, and the blanket on the ground,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

Has the night descended ?
Was the road of late so toilsome ? did we stop discouraged nodding on our way ?
Yet a passing hour I yield you in your tracks to pause oblivious,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

Till with sound of trumpet,
Far, far off the daybreak call—hark ! how loud and clear I hear it wind,
Swift ! to the head of the army !—swift ! spring to your places,
Pioneers ! O pioneers !

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This poem is a call to adventure. The writer urges his country men, whom he addresses as "pioneers", to march with him and "bear the brunt of danger". He compliments them on being members of "the youthful sinewy races", "full of action, full of manly pride and friendship". He asks them to leave the past behind and to embark upon "a newer mightier world, varied world". Their tasks include felling primeval forests, stemming the rivers, surveying the surface of the earth, and piercing the mines. They come from Nebraska, from Arkansas, from Missouri ; they are from the southern States and from the northern States of America, and they have to march onward with their hands clasped in comradeship. They are a "resistless restless race." The poet's heart "aches with tender love for all" ; he is "rapt with love for all." They must never yield or falter ; they must go on through the battle, and through defeat ; they must keep moving and must never stop ; they must die advancing. They will be aided in their task by all the "orbs", "all the clustering suns and planets." The poet also calls upon the women to make their contribution, urging them to remain united :

> O you daughters of the West !
> O you young and elder daughters ! O you mothers and
> you wives !
> Never must you be divided, in our ranks you move united,
> Pioneers ! O pioneers !

The bards and the minstrels must also come "warbling" ; they are also among the pioneers. Let the bards of other lands now rest because they have nothing more to do. The poet tells the pioneers that they should not expect a life of comfort or pleasure : "Not the cushion and the slipper,......not for us the tame enjoyment." Let the gluttonous eaters eat the feast. Let the fat and heavy sleepers continue to sleep. The pioneers have a hard life ahead of them.

This is an inspiring poem intended to arouse the dormant energies of the nation at the time it was written. Here Whitman speaks as a prophet, because much of what he visualised has been achieved by the Americans who have shown themselves worthy of the programme of action and onward march which Whitman outlines in this poem. The feeling of the poem is deep and sincere. Because of its didactic purpose, this poem has aptly been described as "a moralizing ode." By virtue of its thought, feeling, imagery, and significance, this poem occupies an important position in Whitman's verse.

An eminent critic is of the opinion that the core of Whitman's work, its rock-bottom, so to speak, will bear comparison with the best poetry that the world has produced. This critic mentions in this connection such outstanding poems as *Song of Myself*, *I Sing the Body Electric*, *The Sleepers*, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, *Song of the Broad-Axe*, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, and a whole series of shorter poems including one so notable for its lyric qualities as *Tears*, and *Drum-Taps* (which is almost a whole collection dealing with the Civil War of 1860-66). *Pioneers ! O Pioneers*, says this critic, also belongs to this category of poems.

His nationalism is one of the most striking features of Whitman's poetry. With a remarkable exuberance he shouted : "I chant America the mistress, I chant a greater supremacy." His warmest conception of the older nations was that of pity. He called them "once powerful, now reduced, withdrawn or desolate." In a noble measure he asked, in *Pioneers ! O Pioneers* :

> Have the elder races halted ?
> Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas ?
> We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson,
> Pioneers ! O pioneers !

He carried the theme into a sphere which he had not touched before, the consideration of poetry :

> Shrouded bards of other lands, you may rest, you have done your work.

Pioneers ! O Pioneers ! has a theme which is important in Whitman's poetry. This theme is that of the inorganic possibilities unfolding to man's view through a conquest of Nature, the theme of democratic expansion and democratic construction. (The poem called *Song of the Broad-Axe* is an other embodiment of this very theme).

As Whitman drew near to the summit of his powers, he approached a true and spontaneous metre which may be seen in *Pioneers ! O Pioneers*. This poem is even in rhyme, metre, and stanza with a refrain. The language here is exclamatory, often artificially excited, with many inversions (predicate-subject, noun-adjectives) and conventional contractions (*o'er*, *well-grey'd hair*, *trellis'd grape*. Neo-classic poets had used these contractions for the sake of metre (though sometimes only for the eye, as Whitman's *'d* often is as in *grey'd* and *trellis'd*). And Whitman did not need them for this purpose. But he apparently felt that these ancient conventions made his poems sound and look more like poetry.

A poem like this is bound to become rhetorical and grandiloquent. Here are lines which illustrate these characteristics :

> Lo, the darting bowling orb !
> Lo, the brother orbs around, all the clustering suns and planets,
> All the dazzling days, all the mystic nights with dreams,
> Pioneers ! O pioneers !
> These are of us, they are with us,………

The same is true of the last three or four stanzas. But the rhetoric and the grandiloquence are not defects in a poem the theme of which has a noble, almost sublime, quality. The poet who wrote poems of frank sexuality, poems which are almost obscene, could also write inspiring poems with a noble message.

47

Shut Not Your Doors

(First published in 1865)

I. TEXT

SHUT not your doors to me proud libraries,
For that which was lacking on all your well-fill'd shelves, yet needed
most, I bring,
Forth from the war emerging, a book I have made,
The words of my book nothing, the drift of it every thing,
A book separate, not link'd with the rest nor felt by the intellect,
But you ye untold latencies will thrill to every page.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Whitman here calls upon the libraries not to shut their doors against the book of poems that he has written. The libraries are "proud" because they contain the masterpieces of the greatest scholars, philosophers, poets thinkers, historians, statesmen, and so on. It is quite possible that these proud libraries may not think highly of the poetical work of Whitman. But Whitman is no less proud of the work he has accomplished than the libraries are of the treasures they possess. Whitman claims that he has produced a book which was really needed by these libraries. The shelves of these libraries were certainly "well-filled", but there was something lacking, and Whitman claims that he supplied the want with his book of poems. Some of his poems have been inspired by the Civil War :

> "Forth from the war emerging, a book I have made,..."

His book, he says, is a separate work. It is not linked with other books. Nor does it appeal mainly to the intellect. It is a moving book which will stir the feelings and emotions of the readers who "will thrill to every page" of it. Nor does he take his stand on any verbal felicities in his book. What matters is the themes of his poems, not its language :

> "The words of my book nothing, the drift of it every
> thing,..."

This poem shows Whitman's egoism and his sense of his own importance as a poet. There is no denying the fact that he is one of the greatest American poets. And his importance lies mainly in his championship of democratic values and his exaltation of the human body. He liberated poetry from the snobbery of theme or subject-matter, because, as he indicates in the poem *Beginning of My Studies*, this universe provides ample materials for the writing of poetry. Whitman was of the view that nothing in this world is below the dignity of a poet to deal with in his verse. It is also to be noted that Whitman does not attach much importance to stylistic beauties ; it is the subject-matter and the treatment of it that matters. This does not mean that there are no verbal felicities or stylistic beauties in Whitman's poetry. Indeed, he is a master of the language ; and the wealth of his vocabulary, the originality, vividness and power of his phraseology, and the facility with which words and lines flow from his pen are remarkable. But his emphasis, he declares, is on *what* he has to say and not *how* he says it.

48

Cavalry Crossing a Ford

(First published in 1865)

I. TEXT

A LINE in long array where they wind betwixt green islands,
They take a serpentine course, their arms flash in the sun—hark to the musical clank,
Behold the silvery river, in it the splashing horses in loitering stop to drink,
Behold the brown-faced men, each group, each person, a picture, the negligent rest on the saddles,
Some emerge on the opposite bank, others are just entering the ford—while,
Scarlet and blue and snowy white,
The guidon flags flutter gayly in the wind.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This poem, consisting of just seven lines, might well have been written by a twentieth century imagist-poet. As its title indicates, it contains a picture of soldiers on horseback crossing a stream. There is nothing profound in this poem which is just a picture of soldiers on horseback entering the ford and emerging on the opposite bank. The soldier's arms glitter in the sunlight and produce a musical clank. The splashing horses go through the silvery river in a leisurely manner. The flags, scarlet and blue and white, flutter merrily in the wind.

49

Come up from the Fields, Father

(First published in 1865)

I. TEXT

Come up from the fields father, here's letter from our Pete,
And come to the front door mother, here's a letter from thy dear son.

Lo, 'tis autumn,
Lo, where the trees, deeper green, yellower and redder,
Cool and sweeten Ohio's villages with leaves fluttering in the moderate wind,
Where apples ripe in the orchards hang and grapes on the trellis'd vines.

(Smell you the smell of the grapes on the vines?
Smell you the buckwheat where the bees were lately buzzing ?)
Above all, lo, the sky so calm, so transparent after the rain, and with wonderous clouds,
Below too, all calm, all vital and beautiful, and the farm prospers well.

Down in the fields all prospers well,
But now from the fields come father, come at the daughter's call,
And come to the entry mother, to the front door come right away.

Fast as she can she hurries, something ominous, her steps trembling,
She does not tarry to smooth her hair nor adjust her cap.

Open the envelope quickly,
O this is not our son's writing, yet his name is sign'd,
O a strange hand writes for our dear son, O stricken mother's soul !
All swims before her eyes, flashes with black, she catches the main words only,

Sentences broken, *gunshot wound in the breast, cavalry skirmish, taken to hospital,*
At present low, but will soon be better,

Ah now the single figure to me,
Amid all teeming and wealthy Ohio with all its cities and farms,

Sickly white in the face and dull in the head, very faint,
By the jamb of a door leans.

Grieve not so, dear mother, (the just-grown daughter speaks through
her sobs,
The little sisters huddle around speechless and dismay'd,)
See, dearest mother, the letter says Pete will soon be better.

Alas poor boy, he will never be better, (nor may-be needs to be
better, that brave and simple soul,)
While they stand at home at the door he is dead already,
The only son is dead.

But the mother needs to be better,
She with thin form presently drest in black,
By day her meals untouch'd, then at night, fitfully sleeping, often
waking,
In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with one deep longing,
O that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from life escape and
withdraw,
To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The poem is remarkable for its pathos. A daughter calls to her father to come back to the house from the fields, because a letter has been received from Pete, the only son of the family, who had gone to the wars to fight. It is autumn time when the apples and the grapes ripen. The sky is calm and transparent after the rain. The fields have a prosperous look.

The daughter calls out to her father and to her mother to come to the front door in order to receive a letter that has arrived. The envelope is quickly opened. But it is not a letter written by Pete ; it is written on his behalf by someone else. It contains the sad news that Pete has been wounded in the breast by a gunshot, that he has been taken to a hospital in serious condition but that he will soon be better. The news comes as a great shock to the mother. The grown-up daughter begins to sob, her "little sisters huddle around, speechless and dismayed."

The consolation that Pete will soon be better is empty and meaningless because the boy is already dead. It is the mother who now needs to be better. She does not touch her meals during the day and sleeps only fitfully during the night. She wakes up at mid-night and weeps. She has now only one desire, to die and to join her dead son.

This poem brings before us the tragedy of war. The mother's grief here is symbolic of the grief of millions of mothers whose sons are killed in a war. Our hearts go out to the mother in deep sympathy. It is a very touching, poignant poem which makes a deep impact upon the reader.

50

The Wound-Dresser

(First published in 1865)

I. TEXT

1

An old man bending I come among new faces,
Years looking backward resuming in answer to children,
Come tell us old man as from young men and maidens that love me,
(Arous’d and angry, I’d thought to beat the alarum, and urge relentless war,
But soon my fingers fail’d me, my face droop’d and I resign’d myself,
To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead ;)
Years hence of these scenes, of these furious passions, these chances,
Of unsurpass’d heroes, (was one side so brave ? the other was equally brave ;)
Now be witness again, paint the mightiest armies of earth,
Of those armies so rapid so wondrous what saw you to tell us ?
What stays with you latest and deepest ? of curious panics,
Of hard-fought engagements or sieges tremendous what deepest remains ?

2

O maidens and young men I love and that love me,
What you ask of my days those the strangest and sudden your talking recalls,
Soldier alert I arrive after a long march cover’d with sweat and dust,
In the nick of time I come, plunge in the fight, loudly shout in the rush of successful charge,
Enter the captur’d works—yet lo, like a swift-running river they fade,
Pass and are gone they fade—I dwell not on soldiers’ perils or soldier’s joys,
(Both I remember well—many the hardships, few the joys, yet I was content.)

But in silence, in dreams’ projections,
While the world of gain and appearance and mirth goes on,

So soon what is over forgotten, and waves wash the imprints off the sand,
With hinged knees returning I enter the doors, (while for you up there,
Whoever you are, follow without noise and be of strong heart.)

Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
Straight and swift to my wounded I go.

Where they lie on the ground after the battle brought in,
Where their priceless blood reddens the grass the ground,
Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof'd hospital.
To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return,
To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss.

An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail,
Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill'd again,
I onward go, I stop,
With hinged knees and steady hand to dress wounds,
I am firm with each, the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable,
One turns to me his appealing eyes—poor boy ! I never knew you,
Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you.

3

On, on I go, (open doors of time ! open hospital doors !)
The crush'd head I dress, (poor crazed hand tear not the bandage away,)
The neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and through I examine,
Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet life struggles hard,
(Come sweet death ! be persuaded O beautiful death !
In mercy come quickly.)

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood,
Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv'd neck and side-falling head,
His eyes are closed ; his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody stump ;
And has not yet look'd on it.

I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep,
But a day or two more, for see the frame all wasted and sinking,
And the yellow-blue countenance see.
I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound,
Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so offensive,
While the attendant stands behind aside me holding the tray and pail.
I am faithful, I do not give out,
The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,

These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in my breast
a fire, a burning flame.)

4

Thus in silence in dreams' projections,
Returning, resuming I thread my way through the hospitals,
The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad,
(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and
rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The American Civil War (1861—65) was an episode of great importance in the life of Whitman. He witnessed the War at first-hand in 1862 when he went to Virginia to see his brother George who had been wounded. Having seen the suffering of the wounded soldiers, he spent the remaining years of the Civil War in Washington, going among the wounded in the hospital there, carrying sweets and writing-paper, comforting the wounded soldiers with conversation, and helping now and then with dressings and operations. His prose book, *Memoranda During the War* (1875), is the best record we have of these years, though the richest fruit of the War was the volume oi poems which he called *Drum-Taps* (1865) in which was included this poem.

The poet here recalls the days when he went about the hospital-beds to dress the wounds of the soldiers. This poem brings before our eyes the suffering and tragedy of war. The poet describes how the wounded soldiers lie on the ground where their precious blood reddens the grass. Inside the hospitals there are long rows of beds. The poet (the wound-dresser) carries bandages, water, and sponge and is accompanied by an attendant who carries a refuse pail which, in the course of the dressing, is filled with "clotted rags and blood." The soldiers experience sharp pangs when their wounds are dressed. One of them turns his appealing eyes toward the wound-dresser, and the wound-dresser feels that he could sacrifice his own life to save the life of this wounded boy.

There is a soldier with a crushed head. His breathing is hard and his eyes are already glazed. Only death can save him from his pain. Another soldier has his hand amputated. His eyes are closed and his face is pale, and he dares not look at his bloody stump.

Another soldier has a deep wound in the side. He will hardly survive a day or two because his body is all wasted and he is sinking rapidly. The wound-dresser dresses the soldier's "perforated shoulder" and "the foot with the bullet-wound." Then he goes on to dress a soldier's fractured thing and the wound in his abdomen.

The suffering of these wounded soldiers, haunts the wound-dresser when he sits along through the night. Some of the soldiers are very young and the suffering of some is unbearable. They all felt grateful to him for the sympathy he gave them and the little relief that he brought them.

It is a poem which fills us with a keen hatred for war by bringing before our eyes the inhuman and brutal waste of precious human material. It is a deeply moving poem.

The shorter war pieces written by Whitman are least successful when they are concerned with actual combat, most convincing when they deal with Whitman in his role of the wound-dresser, male nurse, and loving consoler of the dying.

51

Reconciliation

(First published in 1865)

I. TEXT

Word over all, beautiful as the sky,
Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost,
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly wash again, and ever again, this soil'd world ;
For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,
I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin—I draw near,
Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Reconciliation belongs to the group of poems called "Drum-Taps". (The poems of this group relate to the American Civil War which had greatly distressed Whitman). Whitman in this poem feels totally reconciled to a man who was fighting on the opposite side in the Civi War and who has now been killed. The poet does not feel any bitterness or hostility towards the man who was his enemy. This man or enemy, says Whitman, was as "divine" as Whitman himself. He looks at his dead enemy, "lying white-faced and still in the coffin". He approaches his enemy's dead body, bends, and touches lightly the dead man's white face with his lips. In other wards, Whitman makes a gesture of reconciliation and friendship towards the dead enemy.

Three points emerge from our reading of this poem. Firstly, the poet feels happy to anticipate that "War and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost." Secondly, Whitman looks at a human being as having a "divine" quality. Man has something divine about him. This is a noble, sublime view of man. Whitman shows himself as deeply religious in taking this view of man. Thirdly, the death of the enemy soldier puts a complete end to the hostility between him and Whitman. This, again, shows a feeling of nobility in the heart of the poem. The death of the enemy brings about an attitude of total forgiveness on the part of the poet towards him.

Though extremely short, this is a poem which elevates the reader's spirit by making him aware of the fundamental kinship that binds all human beings together. The poem puts the reader into a meditative or contemplative mood and makes him realise the futility of War. The extreme simplicity of the language used, and the bare austerity of style are most appropriate to the feeling expressed in the poem. The feeling is, of course, genuine and deep. And the poem carries conviction.

52

O Captain ! My Captain !

(First published in 1865)

I. TEXT

O Captain ! my Captain ! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has wheather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The Port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring :

But O heart ! heart ! heart !
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain ! my Captain ! rise up and hear the bells ;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning ;
Here Captain ! dear father !
This arm beneath your head !
It is some dream that on the deck,
You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won ;
Exult O shores, and ring O bells !
But I with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain iies,
Fallen cold and dead.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The occasion for the writing of this poem was the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth President of the United States of America. Lincoln had taken up the challenge of rebellious Southern States and won a victory over them. Thus he saved the

United States from division and he also abolished slavery.[1] But he was assassinated soon after. The poet expresses his grief and sorrow over Lincoln's death.

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[1] Walt Whitman wrote a number of poems dealing with the Civil War in America and its consequences. The Civil War took place on the issue of Negro slavery. When Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States in 1860, the pro-slavery Southern States announced their decision to break away from the U.S.A. Lincoln refused to accept this decision and a bloody Civil War started. Lincoln's forces won the War and Lincoln announced the abolition of slavery. But about a year later, Lincoln was assassinated by an actor, John Wilkes Booth. Whitman was at that time a junior clerk in a government department.

53

When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd

(First published in 1865-66)

I. TEXT

1

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.
Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.

2

O powerful western fallen star !
O shades of night—O moody, tearful night !
O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star !—
O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me !
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

3

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash'd palings.
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love,
With every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the dooryard,
With delicate-colour'd blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
A sprig with its flower I break.

4

In the swamp in secluded recesses,
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.
Solitary the thrush,

The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat,
Death's outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I know,
If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die.)

5

Over the breast of the spring the land, amid cities,
Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd from the ground, spotting the gray debris,
Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless grass,
Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen,
Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
Night and day journeys a coffin.

6

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,
Through day and night with the great cloud darkening the land,
With the pomp of the inloop'd flags with the cities draped in black,
With the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil'd women standing,
With processions long and winding and the flambeaus of the night,
With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces and the unbared heads,
With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,
With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong and solemn,
With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin,
The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs—where amid these you journey,
With the tolling tolling bell's perpetual clang,
Here, coffin that slowly passes,
I give you my sprig of lilac.

7

(Nor for you, for one alone,
Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,
For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you O sane and sacred death.

All over bouquets of roses,
O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,
But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,
Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,
With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,
For you and the coffins all of you O death.)

8

O western orb sailing the heaven,

Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I walk'd
As I walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night,
As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night,
As you droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side (while the other stars all look'd on,)
As we wander'd together the solemn night, (for something I know not what kept me from sleep,)
As the night advanced. and I saw on the rim of the west how full you were of woe,
As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool transparent night,
As I watch'd where you pass'd and was lost in the netherward black of the night,
As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb,
Concluded, drop in the night, and was gone.

9

Sing on there in the swamp,
O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes, I hear your call,
I hear, I come presently I understand you,
But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain'd me,
The star my departing comrade holds and detains me.

10

O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved ?
And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone ?
And what shall my perfume be for the grave of him I love ?
Sea-winds blown from east and west,
Blown from the Eastern sea and blown from the Western sea, till there on the prairies meeting,
These and with these and the breath of my chant,
I'll perfume the grave of him I love.

11

O what shall I hang on the chamber walls ?
And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls,
To adorn the burial-house of him I love ?

Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes,
With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke lucid and bright,
With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun, burning, expanding the air.
With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green leaves of the trees prolific,
In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a wind-dapple here and there,
With ranging hills on the banks, with many a line against the sky, and shadows,

And the city at hand with dwellings so dense, and stacks of
chimneys,
And all the scenes of life and the workshops, and the workmen hom-
ward returning.

12

Lo, body and soul—this land,
My own Manhattan with spires, and the sparkling and hurrying tides,
and the ships,
The varied and ample land, the South and the North in the light,
Ohio's shores and flashing Missouri,
And ever the far-spreading prairies cover'd with grass and corn.

Lo, the most excellent sun so calm and haughty,
The violet and purple morn with just-felt breezes,
The gentle soft-born measureless light,
The miracle spreading bathing all, the fulfill'd noon,
The coming eve delicious, the welcome night and the stars,
Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land.

13

Sing on, sing on you gray-brown bird,
Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the
bushes,
Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines,
Sing on dearest brother, warble your reedy song,
Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe.

O liquid and free and tender !
O wild and loose to my soul—O wondrous singer !
You only I hear—yet the star holds me, (but will soon depart,)
Yet the lilac with mastering odor holds me.

14

Now while I sat in the day and look'd forth,
In the close of the day with its light and the fields of spring, and the
farmers preparing their crops,
In the large unconscious scenery of my land with its lakes and
forests,
In the heavenly aerial beauty, (after the perturb'd winds and the
storms,)
Under the arching heavens of the afternoon swift passing, and the
voices of children and women,
The many-moving sea-tides, and I saw the ships how they sail'd,
And the summer approaching with richness, and the fields all busy
with labor,
And the infinite separate houses, how they all went on, each with its
meals and minutia of daily usages,
And the streets how their throbbings throbb'd and the cities pent—lo,
then and there,
Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the
rest,

Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail,
And I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death.

Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,
And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,
And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions,
I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,
Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness,
To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.

And the singer so shy to the rest receiv'd me,
The gray-brown bird I know receiv'd us comrades three,
And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love.

From deep secluded recesses,
From the fragrant cedars and the ghostly pines so still,
Came the carol of the bird.

And the charm of the carol rapt me,
As I held as if by their hands my comrades in the night,
And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird.

Come lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later delicate death.

Prais'd be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love, sweet love—but praise ! praise ! praise !
For the sure-enwinding—arms of cool-enfolding death.

Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet.
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome ?
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come unfalteringly.

Approach strong deliveress,
When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead,
Last in the loving floating ocean of thee,
Loved in the flood of the bliss O death.

From me to thee glad serenades,
Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and feastings for thee,
And the sight of the open landscape and the high-spread sky are fitting,
And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.

The night in silence under many a star,
The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose voice I know,
And the soul turning to thee, O vast and well-veil'd death,
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.

Over the tree-tops I float thee a song,
Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the prairies wide,
Over the dense-pack'd cities all and the teeming wharves and ways,
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death.

15

To the tally of my soul,
Loud and strong kept up the gray-brown bird,
With pure deliberate notes spreading filling the night

Loud in the pines and cedars dim,
Clear in the freshness moist and the swamp-perfume,
And I with my comrades there in the night.

While my sight that was bound in my eyes unclosed,
As to long panoramas of visions.

And I saw askant the armies,
I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags,
Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc'd with missiles I saw them,
And carried hither and you through the smoke, and torn and bloody.

And at last but a few shreds left on the staffs, (and all in silence,)
And the staffs all splinter'd and broken.

I saw battle-corpses myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,
But I saw they were not as was thought,
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not,
The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,
And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.

16

Passing the visions, passing the night,
Passing, unloosing the hold of my comrades' hands,
Passing the song of the hermit bird and the tallying song of my soul,
Victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying ever-altering song,
As low and wailing, yet clear the notes, rising and falling, flooding the night,
Sadly sinking and fainting, as warning and warning, and yet again bursting with joy,
Covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven,
As that powerful psalm in the night I heard from recesses,
Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves,
I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming returning with spring.

I cease from my song for thee,
From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west, communing with thee,

O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night.
Yet each to keep and all, retrievements out of the night.
The song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird,
And the tallying chant, the echo arous'd in my soul,
With the lustrous and drooping star with the countenance full of woe,
With the holders holding my hand nearing the call of the bird,
Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever to keep, for the dead I loved so well,
For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands—and this for his dear sake,
Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,
There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This is another of Walt Whitman's major poems. It was written as an elegy on the death of President Abraham Lincoln, and was first published in 1865 in the "Sequel to Drum-Taps." Most critics regard this as his most successful poem. As in most elegies, the dead man is not mentioned by name and, like most elegies, this poem moves from an impassioned grief to a philosophical acceptance of death. The symbols chosen by the poet are lilacs, Venus (the evening star), and the hermit-thrush, which are all symbols of re-birth and resurrection.

In the beginning the poet gives expression to what seems for a time inconsolable sorrow. Then comes some consoling thought, and this leads finally to a complete reconciliation with the fact of death. Section 1 states the theme and the symbols—the lilacs, the star, and spring, describing these three symbols as a "trinity". Section 2 expresses the poet's impassioned grief. Section 3 develops the symbolism of the lilacs. The heart-shaped leaves of the lilac-bush symbolise love, and the poet breaks from the bush "a sprig with its flower." In Section 4, the poet describes the hermit-thrush, a shy and hidden bird, singing by itself "death's outlet song of life." Section 5 describes the journey of President Lincoln's coffin (from Washington to its destination) across a wide landscape with varied topography. Section 6 describes the coffin passing through lanes and streets, watched by countless solemn faces, with the poet offering his symbolic "sprig of lilac."

In Section 7, the poet offers to write a song, not for Abraham Lincoln only, but for "sane and sacred death." The roses, lilies or lilacs with which his arms are loaded are to be placed not only on Lincoln's coffin but on all coffins. The offering of blossoms and flowers is not only an act of affection, but also an act symbolic of the bestowal of life on the dead, the gift of eternal spiritual life to the physically dead.

In Section 8, the poet recalls that a month before Lincoln's funeral his attention was caught by the evening star which seemed to be telling him something that he did not understand then. He now realises that the evening star wanted to foretell Lincoln's death. (In this Section, the star, in its sadness and woe, seems to be an interested celestial observer of man's fate—like a deity who foresees and mourns but is helpless to prevent the approaching tragedy). In Section 9, the poet calls Lincoln a star and, addressing the bird, says that though he hears its song and will respond to it presently, he is still detained by his grief. (A dramatic struggle begins in this Section. It is a struggle between the two symbols—the bird which represents an acceptance of death as part of Nature, and the star which represents grief over a personal loss, namely, the death of Lincoln) :

> But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain'd
> me,
> The star, my departing comrade, holds and detains me.

In Section 10, the poet asks in what manner he should sing for the loved one who is dead, and what perfume he should sprinkle on the grave of that loved one. He decides that the sea-winds blowing from east and west, combined with the breath of his song, will be the perfume for the loved one's grave. In Section 11 and 12, the poet describes the pictures with which he will adorn the tomb of Lincoln. These will be pictures of "growing spring and farms and homes", of sunlight, of fresh sweet herbage, of rivers and hills, of the city with its scenes of life and the workshops, and the workmen homeward returning. "The varied and ample land and the far-spreading prairies" mentioned in Section 12, convey a sense of Lincoln's breadth of vision and amplitude of soul, while the "morn with just-felt breezes" and "the coming eve delicious, the welcome night and the stars" suggest Lincoln's immortality. In Section 13, the poet calls upon the bird to continue its song from the swamps. Although the poet is in a mood to respond to the bird's song, he is yet not ready to leave the star :

> You only I hear...yet the star holds me, (but will soon
> depart)
> Yet the lilac with mastering odor holds me.

That response comes at last in Section 14 as the cloud, "the long black trail" falls upon and envelops the nation, the poet with the rest : "enveloping me with the rest" (The long black trail represents a merging of the images of the cloud and the funeral train). The poet now flees into the "shadowy cedars and ghostly pines" in order to join the bird. The poet goes thither flanked by two companions. These two companions are "the knowledge of death" and "the thought of death." "The knowledge of death" means death as a fact in Nature, while "the thought of death" means the loss of a personal friend or loved one through death. (Or, the knowledge of death means insight into death as a spiritual re-birth, while the thought of death means death conceived as the cruel depriver of life, which held the poet in his grief and made it difficult for him to leave the star in order to go to the bird.)

The bird's carol of death (Lines 135-162) is a song of joy and ecstasy. Death in this song is described as a "dark mother" and a "strong deliveress." The universal necessity and goodness of death is here indicated :

> Come lovely and soothing death,
> Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
> In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
> Sooner or later, delicate death.

In Section 15, the bird's song creates for the poet a state that bestows mystical insight. The poet sees "long panoramas of visions." These are visions of the civil war :

> I saw, battle-corpses, myriads of them,
> And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
> I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of
> the war...,

But the poet discovers that those who were killed in the war are fully at rest while it is the surviving relatives and friends who suffer :

> The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,
> And the wife and the child and the musing comrade
> suffer'd
> And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.

In Section 16, the poet repeats some of the images and symbols already stated—death's outlet song, lilac with heart-shaped leaves, the song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird ; the tallying chant ; the lustrous and drooping star. The coffin of "the sweetest wisest soul" of all the poet's days has now reached the end of its journey, and lilac, star, and bird are twined with the song that the poet has sung. The poem thus ends on a note of acceptance, peace, and emotional equilibrium.

The threnody *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd* shows how a diverse people are united in their common love of Lincoln, through whose death that love is made perfect and immortal. For the completion of the growth of Whitman's love from the sensual and particular to the spiritual and universal it only remained for the benevolent compassion born of the tragedy of war to be extended beyond the shores of America and enfold the world. However, his affections were too firmly rooted in the soil of nationalism, and universal love was for him rather an ideal than a consummation.

54

Beginning My Studies

(First published in 1867)

I. TEXT

BEGINNING my studies the first step pleas'd me so much,
The mere fact consciousness, these forms, the power of motion,
The least insect or animal, the senses, eyesight, love,
The first step I say awed me and pleas'd me so much,
I have hardly gone and hardly wish'd to go any farther,
But stop and loiter all the time to sing it in ecstatic songs.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

In this poem Whitman speaks of the things that interested him at the very outset for the writing of poetry—the mere fact of consciousness, the various objects and shapes around him, the power of motion, the least insect or animal, the senses, eyesight, love. These things awed him as well as pleased him. Such was the tremendous effect of these things on his mind that he did not feel like seeking any other things. Feeling happy and satisfied with these things he spent his time in writing about them in "ecstatic" poems.

Thus Whitman refers in this poem to the themes of his poems. Everything that he saw around him became the subject of a poem. And he speaks too of the ecstatic or joyous note of his poetry ; (the major portion of his poetry, of course, because he has also written sad and elegiac poems). It would seem that Whitman has here summed up his poetical theory so well that no criticism could possibly have done it better. A poet, according to the view implied in this poem, need not look for unusual and remote themes and abstract notions or ideas for the writing of his poetry. This visible, concrete world provides ample materials to the poet. There is enough in this world both to please and awe the poet. The poet's contacts with this universe should send him into raptures. A poet should feel happy to celebrate in his poetry the universe and all that he sees in it.

Commenting upon this brilliant short poem, a critic points out that it expresses Whitman's "almost child-like ecstasy in sensuous contact with *things*. Says this critic : "In his obsession with sensuous objects, not only in theory but also in practice, Whitman was in a sense a fore-runner of the imagists". And this critic goes on to say: "Whitman's constant faith was that somehow, someway the material universe held the clue to the spiritual, and that impassioned encounter with the one would lead to knowledge and apprehension of the other."

55

Aboard at a Ship's Helm

(First published in 1867)

I. TEXT

ABOARD at a ship's helm,
A young steersman steering with care.

Through fog on a sea-coast dolefully ringing,
An ocean-bell—O a warning bell, rock'd by the waves.

O you give good notice indeed, you bell by the sea-reefs ringing,
Ringing, ringing, to warn the ship from its wreck-place.

For as on the alert O steersman, you mind the loud admonition,
The bows turn, the freighted ship tacking speeds away under her gray
 sails,
The beautiful and noble ship with all her precious wealth speeds away
 gayly and safe

But O the ship, the immortal ship ! O ship aboard the ship !
Ship of the body, ship of the soul, voyaging, voyaging, voyaging.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The first nine lines of this poem give us a picture of a ship's pilot carefully steering ship and changing its direction on hearing a warning—bell from the sea-coast nearby. The bell warns the steersman at the ship's helm of the sea-reefs which will wreck the ship if it continues to sail in the same direction. But the alert steersman hears the loud ringing of the warning-bell and changes the direction of the ship, thus saving it from the danger which threatened it. As a consequence of the steersman's action, the ship remains safe and sails away merrily along a different course.

So much about this sailing ship. But what about another kind of ship ? What about the immortal ship, the ship of the voyager's body, the ship of the voyager's soul ? This ship, namely the ship of the passenger's soul, knows no rest and keeps "voyaging, voyaging, voyaging", without end. That is to say, the soul of man knows no destination, but keeps wandering, always on the brink of a precipice, always in danger of getting wrecked, with nothing to warn it or to give it any notice of the danger.

The poet has effectively conveyed to us the idea of the uncertainties and the disequilibrium which the human soul goes through all the time. The idea has been expressed by means of a contrast with a sailing ship of those days. The poem contains a number of vivid pictures, such as the following :

> Through fog on a sea-coast dolefully ringing,
> An ocean-bell—O a warning bell, rock'd by the waves.

The picture of the ship carrying a rich cargo, changing its course, and sailing away safe and happy is even more effective :

> The bows turn, the freighted ship tacking speeds away under her grey sails,
> The beautiful and noble ship with all her precious wealth speeds away gayly and safe.

This is what may be called an "imagist" picture—brief, condensed, and strikingly vivid.

This is certainly among the better poems of Whitman. It combines striking imagery with a beautiful idea. The state of the human soul has been expressed very appropriately. The poem carries conviction because of the writer's obvious sincerity. This poem is bound to have a deep effect on readers of a contemplative turn of mind.

56

Tears

(First published in 1867)

I. TEXT

Tears : tears ! tears !
In the night, in solitude, tears,
On the white shore dripping, dripping, suck'd in by the sand,
Tears, not a star shining, all dark and desolate,
Moist tears from the eyes of a muffled head ;
O who is that ghost ? that form in the dark, with tears ?
What shapeless lump is that, bent, crouch'd there on the sand ?
Streaming tears, sobbing tears, throes, choked with wild cries ;
O storm, embodied, rising, careering with swift steps along the beach !
O wild end dismal night storm, with wind—O belching and desperate !
O shade so sedate decorous by day, with calm countenance and regulated pace,
But away at night as you fly, none looking—O then the unloosen'd ocean,
Of tears ! tears ! tears !

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This poem is a kind of footnote to the more sentimental and tear-jerking sections of the poem, *Out of the Cradle.* This short lyric begins as a rather impressive piece but at the end where we read about "the unloosen'd end of tears ! tears ! tears !" it is difficult not to be reminded of Alice in Wonderland swimming in the ocean she has made with her weeping. Nevertheless the ambiguity or doubleness of *Out of the Cradle* is well-represented in this poem, and it is done in a more literal way. Here the poet imagines himself to be "sedate and decorous by day, with calm countenance and regulated pace" (line 11). But at night he is a ghost with a "muffled head" (line 5) weeping desperately on the beach. There is, in the following lines, only an undifferentiated horror and, in a Gothicized setting, an almost total extinction of personality :

> O who is that ghost ? that form in the dark, with tears ?
> What shapeless lump is that , bent, crouched there on the sand ?

Streaming tears and sobbing tears, throes, choked with wild cries ;
O storm, embodied, rising, careering with swift steps along the beach ?
O wild and dismal night storm,...

Here is an illuminating comment on the poem : "The form of Whitman's conversational poems depends on the course the conversation takes and the temper which has initiated it. In *Tears*, the tone of conversation has passed into that of soliloquy. The mood here is too intimate, too remote, to admit of the idea of any but an impersonal utterance ; we picture the soul of the poet addressing as it were some shadow of itself. The form here is of such exquisite sensitiveness that it is with an effort we remember the offences its author could commit. The lines "O who is that ghost" and "What shapeless lump is that" serve just to maintain the air of realistic familiarity that Whitman loves. He takes advantage of the ballast they provide to soar up into heights of suggestion and impressionism where he is equally at home. The storm, the human creature out in it, exchange forces, appearance, personality almost, from line to line. The tears are the rain, but who is it that is weeping ? The night, the tempest, the sea-shore are part of the solitude and the despair they cover, part of the outpouring of passion and sorrow which they liberate, echo and absorb. And how does language take the impress of hints so vague and so conflicting and of an integration so profound ? All through the piece alliteration, though never obtruding itself, and indeed never appearing till it is sought out, adds significance to the choice of the words by coaxing the reader to dwell upon them and so helping him to pass naturally over gaps whether of grammar or idea which might otherwise check him ; he may observe next how every line, sensitive to the cadence of the first, divides itself sympathetically into a succession of lesser impulses, of which there are usually, but not always, three ; and finally, as the sign of a still more vital sensitiveness, he will note the repetition of the key-note of the piece, the word 'tears'. The word is not only repeated, but variously placed in successive lines, so that by maintenance of the emphasis upon it its structural significance may be fully brought out. Then, at what is structurally the centre of the piece, there is a cessation ; four lines of release and tumult follow which are silent of it ; and so we are prepared for the beauty and inevitability of the final cadence in which it returns."

57

Passage to India

(First published in 1868)

I. TEXT

1

SINGING my days,
Singing the great achievements of the present,
Singing the strong light works of engineers,
Our modern wonders (the antique ponderous Seven outvied,)
In the Old World the east the Suez canal,
The New by its mighty railroad spann'd,
The seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires ;
Yet first to sound, and ever sound, the cry with thee O soul,
The Past ! the Past ! the Past !

The Past—the dark unfathom'd retrospect !
The teeming gulf—the sleepers and the shadows !
The past—the infinite greatness of the past !
For what is the present after all but a growth out of the past ?
(As a projectile form'd, impell'd, passing a certain line, still keeps on,
So the present, utterly form'd by the past.)

2

Passage O soul to India !
Eclaircise the myths Asiatic, the primitive fables.

Not you alone proud truths of the world,
Nor you alone ye facts of modern science,
But myths and fables of eld, Asia's, Africa's fables,
The far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloos'd dreams,
The deep diving bibles and legends,
The daring plots of the poets, the elder religions ;
O you temples fairer than lilies pour'd over by the rising sun !
O you fables spurning the known, eluding the hold of the known, mounting to heaven !
You lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses burnish'd with gold !
Towers of fables immortal fashion'd from mortal dreams !
You too I welcome and fully the same as the rest !
You too with joy I sing.

Passage to India !
Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first ?
The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,
The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,
The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,
The lands to be welded together.

A worship new I sing,
You captains, voyagers, explores, yours,
You engineers, you architects, machinists, yours,
You, not for trade or transportation only,
But in God's name, and for thy sake O soul.

3

Passage to India !
Lo soul for thee of tableaus twain,
I see in one the Suez canal initiated, open'd,
I see the procession of steamships, the Empress Eugenie's leading the van,
I mark from on deck the strange landscape, the pure sky, the level sand in the distance,
I pass swiftly the picturesque groups, the workmen gather'd,
The gigantic dredging machines.

In one again, different, (yet thine, all thine, O soul, the same,)
I see over my own continent the Pacific railroad surmounting every barrier,
I see continual trains of cars winding along the Platte carrying freight and passengers,
I hear the locomotives rushing and roaring, and the shrill steam-whistle,
I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the world,
I cross the Laramie plains, I note the rocks in grotesque shapes, the buttes,
I see the plentiful larkspur and wild onions, the barren, colorless, sage-deserts,
I see in glimpses afar or towering immediately above me the great mountains, I see the Wind river and the Wahsatch mountains,
I see the Monument mountain and the Eagle's Nest, I pass the Promontory, I ascend the Nevadas,
I scan the noble Elk mountain and wind around its base,
I see the Humboldt range, I thread the valley and cross the river,
I see the clear waters of lake Tahoe, I see forests of majestic pines,
Or crossing the great desert, the alkaline plains, I behold enchanting mirages of waters and meadows.
Marking through these and after all, in duplicate slender lines,
Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel,
Tying the Eastern to the Western sea,
The road between Europe and Asia,

(Ah Genoese thy dream ! the dream !
Centuries after thou art laid in thy grave,
The shore thou foundest verifies thy dream.)

4

Passage to India !
Struggles of many a captain, tales of many a sailor dead,
Over my mood stealing and spreading they come,
Like clouds and cloudlets in the unreach'd sky.

Along all history, down the slopes,
As a rivulet running, sinking now, and now again to the surface rising.

A ceaseless thought, a varied train—lo, soul, to thee, thy sight, they rise,
The plans, the voyages again, the expeditions ;
Again Vasco de Gama sails forth,
Again the knowledge gain'd, the mariner's compass,
Lands found and nations born, thou born America,
For purpose vast, man's long probation fill'd,
Thou rondure of the world at last accomplish'd

5

O vast Rondure, swimming in space,
Cover'd all over with visible power and beauty,
Alternate light and day and the teeming spiritual darkness,
Unspeakable high processions of sun and moon and countless stars above,
Below, the manifold grass and waters, animals, mountains, trees,
With inscrutable purpose, some hidden prophetic intention,
Now first it seem my thought begins to span thee,

Down from the gardens of Asia descending radiating,
Adam and Eve appear, then their myriad progeny after them,
Wandering, yearning, curious, with restless explorations,
With questionings, baffled, formless, feverish, with never-happy hearts,
What that sad incessant refrain, *Wherefore unsatisfied soul* ? and *Whither O mocking life* ?

Ah who shall soothe these feverish children ?
Who justify these restless explorations ?
Who speak the secret of impassive earth ?
Who bind it to us ? what is this separate Nature so unnatural ?
What is this earth to our affections ? (unloving earth, without a throb to answer ours,
Cold earth, the place of graves.)

Yet soul be sure the first intent remains, and shall be carried out,
Perhaps even now the time has arrived.

After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd.)
After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,
After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,
Finally shall come the poet worthy that name,
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.

Then not your deeds only O voyagers, O scientists and inventors,
shall be justified,

All these hearts as of fretted children shall be sooth'd,
All affection shall be fully responded to, the secret shall be told,
All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook'd and
link'd together,
The whole earth, this cold, impassive, voiceless earth, shall be completely justified,
Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplish'd and compacted by
the true son of God, the poet,
(He shall indeed pass the straits and conquer the mountains,
He shall double the cape of Good Hope to some purpose,)
Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more,
The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them.

6

Year at whose wide-flung door I sing !
Year of the purpose accomplish'd !
Year of the marriage of continents, climates and oceans !
(No mere doge of Venice now wedding the Adriatic,)
I see O year in you the vast terraqueous globe given and giving all,
Europe to Asia, Africa, join'd, and they to the New World,
The lands, geographies, dancing before you, holding a festival
garland,
As brides and bridegrooms hand in hand,

Passage to India !
Cooling airs from Caucasus far, soothing cradle of man,
The river Euphrates flowing, the past lit up again.

Lo soul, the retrospect brought forward,
The old, most populous wealthiest of earth's lands,
The streams of the Indus and the Ganges and their many affluents,
(I my shores of America walking to-day behold, resuming all,)
The tale of Alexander on his warlike marches suddenly dying,
On one side China and on the other side Persia and Arabia,
To the south the great seas and the bay of Bengal,
The flowing literatures, tremendous epics, religions, castes,
Old occult Brahma interminably far back, the tender and junior
Buddha,
Central and southern empires and all their belongings, possessors,
The wars of Tamerlane, the reign of Aurungzebe,
The traders, rulers, explorers, Moslems, Venetians, Byzantium, the
Arabs, Portuguese,
The first travelers famous yet, Marco Polo, Batouta the Moor,
Doubts to be solv'd, the map incognita, blanks to be fill'd,
The foot of man unstay'd, the hands never at rest,
Thyself O soul that will not brook a challenge.

The mediaeval navigators rise before me,
The world of 1492, with its awaken'd enterprise,

Something swelling in humanity now like the sap of the earth in
spring,
The sunset splendor of chivalry declining.

And who art thou sad shade ?
Gigantic, visionary, thyself a visionary,
With majestic limbs and pious beaming eyes,
Spreading around with every look of thine a golden world,
Enhuing it with gorgeous hues.

As the chief histrion,
Down to the footlights walks in some great scena,
Dominating the rest I see the Admiral himself,
(History's type of courage, action, faith,)
Behold him sail from Palos leading his little fleet,
His voyage behold, his return, his great fame,
His misfortunes, calumniators, behold him a prisoner, chain'd,
Behold his dejection, poverty, death.

(Curious in time I stand, nothing the efforts of heroes,
Is the deferment long ? bitter the slander, poverty, death ?
Lies the seed unreck'd for centuries in the ground ? lo, to God's due
occasion,
Uprising in the night, it sprouts, blooms,
And fills the earth with use and beauty.)

7

Passage indeed O soul to primal thought,
Not lands and seas alone, thy own clear freshness,
The young maturity of brood and bloom,
The realms of budding bibles.

O soul, repressless, I with thee and thou with me,
Thy circumnavigation of the world begin,
Of man, the voyage of his mind's return,
To reason's early paradise,
Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions,
Again with fair creation.

8

O we can wait no longer
We too take ship O soul,
Joyous we too launch out on trackless seas,
Fearless for unknown shores, on waves of ecstasy to sail,
Amid the wafting winds, (thou pressing me to thee, I thee to me, O
soul,)
Caroling free, singing our song of God,
Chanting our chant of pleasant exploration.

With laugh and many a kiss,
(Let others deprecate, let others weep for sin, remorse, humiliation)
O soul thou pleasest me, I thee,

Ah more than any priest O soul we too believe in God,
But with the mystery of God we dare not dally.

O soul thou pleasest me, I thee
Sailing these seas or on the hills, or waking in the night,
Thoughts, silent thoughts, of Time and Space and Death, like waters
flowing,
Bear me indeed as through the regions infinite,
Whose air I breathe, whose ripples hear, lave me all over,
Bathe me O God in thee, mounting to thee,
I and my soul to range in range of thee.

O thou transcendent,
Nameless, the fibre and the breath,
Light of the light, shedding forth universes, thou centre of them,
Thou mightier centre of the true, the good, the loving,
Thou moral, spiritual fountain—affection's source—thou reservoir,
(O pensive soul of me—O thirst unsatisfied—waitest not there ?
Waitest not haply for us somewhere there the Comrade perfect ?)
Thou pulse—thou motive of the stars, suns, systems,
That, circling, move in order, safe, harmonious,
Athwart the shapeless vastnesses of space.
How should I think, how breathe a single breath, how speak, if, out
of myself,
I could not launch, to those, superior universes ?

Swiftly I shrivel at the thought of God,
At Nature and its wonders, Time, and Space and Death,
But that I, turning, call to thee O soul, thou actual Me,
And lo, thou gently masterest the orbs,
Thou matest Time, smilest content at Death,
And fillest, swellest full the vastnesses of Space.

Greater than stars or suns,
Bounding O soul thou journeyest forth ;
What love than thine and ours could wider amplify ?
What aspirations, wishes, outvie thine and ours O soul ?
What dreams of the ideal ? what plans of purity, perfection, strength ?
What cheerful willingness for other's sake to give up all ?
For other's sake to suffer all ?

Reckoning ahead O soul, when thou, the time achiev'd,
The seas all cross'd wheather'd the capes, the voyage done,
Surrounded, copest, frontest God, yieldest, the aim attain'd,
As fill'd with friendship, love complete, the Elder Brother found,
The Younger melts in fondness in his arms.

9

Passage to more than India !
Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights ?
O soul, voyagest thou indeed on voyages like those ?
Disportest thou on waters such as those ?
Soundest below the Sanscrit and the Vedas ?
Then have thy bent unleash'd.

Passage to you, your shores, ye aged fierce enigmas !
Passage to you, to mastership of you, ye strangling problems !

You, strew'd with the wrecks of skeletons, that, living, never reach'd
you.

Passage to more than India ?
O secret of the earth and sky !
Of you O waters of the sea ! O winding creeks and rivers !

Of you O woods and fields ! of you strong mountains of my land !
Of you O prairies ! of you gray rocks !
O morning red ! O clouds ! O rain and snows !
O day and night, passage to you !

O sun and moon and all you stars ! Sirius and Jupiter !
Passage to you !

Passage, immediate passage ! the blood burns in my veins !
Away O soul ! hoist instantly the anchor !
Cut the hawsers—haul out—shake out every sail !
Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough ?
Have we not grovel'd here long enough, eating and drinking like mere
brutes ?
Have we not darken'd and dazed ourselves with books long
enough ?

Sail forth—steer for the deep waters only,
Reckless O soul, exploring I with thee, and thou with me,
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

O my brave soul !
O farther farther sail !
O daring joy, but safe ! are they not all the seas of God ?
O farther, farther, farther sail !

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The scope of *Passage to India* is universal. Beginning in the present, it integrates the present with the past and the future. The poet suggests a space-time continuum that includes all the lands and peoples of all time in a union with God, and God is apparently conceived as essentially identical with the total principle of organisation in the universe. Thus "the strong light works of engineers", the achievements of materialistic science and technology, are seen first as a means of reaching the (specifically Asiatic) past, second as a means of bringing lands and people together in close union in the present, and finally as vehicles of a new religious harmony between the immortal soul of man and the otherwise alien universe in the future. It is in the spirit that speaker in *Passage to India* wishes to assimilate "the myths Asitatic", "the deep diving bibles and legends", "the daring plots of the poets", the "fables spurning the known, eluding the hold of the known, mounting to heaven !"

The dominant metaphor of the poem, in harmony with its title, is that of discovery. It uses the same combination of geographical and scientific exploration as Keats's sonnet "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer", but with a far larger reference. The goal is the meaning of life, which is ultimately to be discovered by the poet, who shall solve the problem of the whole relation of mankind to the earth, or the universe.

The three dramatic events which stimulated *Passage to India,* were the opening of the Suez Canal, the spanning of the American continent by rail, and the laying of the Atlantic cable (the "eloquent gentle wires"). In this great poem Whitman saw the present world as but a growth out of the past, and here vision tried to encompass the unfolding past and project the future. It was a large and magnificent idea sweeping over the centuries and across continents, connecting the "myths and fables" of old Asia and Africa, "the deep diving bibles" and wise religions with the great achievements of engineers and light-bringing science.

Whitman's is the mystical, spiritual vision of the poet, and not the practical blueprint of the diplomat. Like the saint and the religious prophet, he saw how the world had come to a place in history when an interlinking of lands and continents would bring the different peoples together. This has been God's intent :

> Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first ?
> The earth to be spann'd, connected by network, *etc.*

Man's passage is outward to more than India. The way may be hazardous and beset with dangers and be far from clear, but over the dark seas of tomorrow those shores are calling :

> Passage to you, your shores, ye aged fierce enigmas !
> Passage to you, to mastership of you, ye strangling problems !
> You, strewed with the wrecks of skeletons, that, living, never reached you.

Though there have been wrecks, and may yet be more wrecks, man can only go forward from where the world is, sailing outward.

Stated broadly, the theme of the poem is that knowledge leads inevitably to faith. This idea is developed through stages by a series of declamatory phrases, the repeated chant, "Passage to India !" The "passage" refers first to the actual or physical passage made possible by the trans-continental railroad, the trans-Atlantic cable, and the Suez Canal, linking west to east in a communication network that Whitman celebrates as indicative of the scientific achievement of his age.

The actual passage is transformed into an intellectual one (or understanding) and then into a religious one (or faith) and finally into another "actual" one—the passage of the individual from life to death.

For a study of the imagery of the poem, the central passage occurs in Section 8 with the address to God, or the transcendent reality which is presented mainly through images of light and water :

God is "Light of the light" "fountain", "reservoir"—the basic idea being that God is the essence and origin of light and water. God is also described in terms of "breath" and "pulse."

"Descent" characterises Whitman's presentation of Adam and Eve in Section 5. Without this descent, the divine could not express itself. The motion of descent is answered by a pattern of ascending imagery.

The railroad, the cable, and the canal are of course, variously described as "crossing" the earth, as "bridging", as "tying": through them the earth is "spann'd, connected by network", the lands "welded together." This makes clear Whitman's celebration of technology, for it works out the purposes implicit in the principle of love that all "the separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook'd and link'd together", that it shall, through the poet, "absolutely fuse" Nature and man. The imagery of marriage symbolises best for Whitman the whole process of opposites joining to produce better and more vigorous forms of life.

"If pieces like *Passage to India* do not appeal to us very much, it is because Whitman here gives up poetry and becomes a speech-maker. This seems clearly illustrated by the following three lines from this poem :

> The Past—the dark unfathom'd retrospect !
> The teeming gulf—the sleepers and the shadows !
> The past—the infinite greatness of the past.

After an excellent first line, and a satisfactory second, the poet gives way to the orator declaiming vulgarly from his public platform."

The ocean, which in *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, is felt as the source of being and is said to be paradoxically fearful and infinitely delightful, is, in the later poems, merely a futureless and homogeneous medium in which the soul seeks its perfect equalisation with all things.

The poet's first general problem in *Passage to India* is determining the real significance of the "achievements of the present" (line 2) and singing of them properly. These "modern wonders" (line 4) are the Suez Canal, the "mighty railroad" (line 6) in the New World, and the Atlantic, the "eloquent gentle wires" (line 7). Yet the poet, in celebrating present technology, would not neglect the past—the "dark unfathom'd retrospect" (line 10) in favour of "strong light works" (line 3). The essence of the past is India. Passage to India, then, is a path created anew by modern technology, which supplies a basis for new and more harmonious social relationships and a new religion : "A worship new I sing." (line 36).

The passive companion of the poet in his song is the soul which is able to evaluate and approve of the poet's speculation. The soul is the passive partner in the association at first, accepting and approving the poet's explanation of the "passage" on its various levels. The soul's function becomes more positive when the poet achieves his deepest understanding of India as the land of "primal thought". Finally, on the "trackless seas" of God, the poet turns to the soul, and it is the soul that masters the orbs and comes to terms with time, space, and death. The invocation that concludes the poem is, significantly, to the soul (lines 251-55).

There are many technical devices in the poem which contribute to its unity and intensity and make it finally one of Whitman's great works. The figure of Columbus emerges as a compelling one. He appears first as the Genoese who dreams of India becomes the failure who achieves ultimate justification long after death, and provides a permanent model for the poet—not for crossing the seas of the earth but for sailing the eternal waters of time, space, and death.

The symbol "India" has a rewarding richness in the poem. It begins by being simply the geographical east, east of Suez and west of the "mighty railroad". It becomes the past of religions, bibles, legends fables and the garden from which man commenced his feverish exploration. It terminates by being the rich land that will stay a man's restless foot and the area of "primal thought" in which man can recover original innocence and live in harmony with nature.

"Passage" itself has a rich elaboration. It is the formal "procession of steamships" in the Suez Canal, and the railroad journey. It includes all the expeditions in history that strove toward the fabled land, and it extends to man's whole ceaseless exploration since his departure from the Garden of Eden.

Water-figures contribute much to the unity of the poem—the voyages of the explorers, Columbus and Vasco de Gama, the earth "swimming in space", the "flowing literatures" (line 134) of the east, the sailing of the poet and the soul upon uncharted seas, and finally the all-absorbing ocean of God, "spiritual fountain—affection's source—thou reservoir." (line 198).

The structure of the poem reveals a dramatic progression. The nine sections of the poem may be grouped as follows : Sections 1—3 Space : The Earth Spanned. Sections 4—6 Time : The Slopes of History. Sections 7—9 Death : The Soul's Circumnavigation.

Passage to India is a dramatisation of the poet's voyages through space and time until, at the end, he arrives at his destination outside both. The meditations on space and time lead to mystical insight into death and an affirmation similar to that in *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* and *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd*. Here is a brief analysis of the poem :

Sections 1—3

The emphasis in these three Sections is placed on space. The achievements of the present which the poet sings are man's contemporary achievements in spanning the globe and bringing the various lands together. The tendency of the entire first section is to connect closely and inseparably past and present, through the modern miracles that have diminished space and thus diminished time. The first Section concludes with one of the most vivid of Whitman's metaphors :

> As a projectile form'd, impell'd, passing a certain line,
> still keeps on,
> So the present, utterly form'd, impell'd by the past.

Section 2 continues the identification of time with space. The past, "the dark unfathom'd retrospect", turns out to be a geographical reference to Asia and Africa, though the reference is ultimately not geographical but spiritual. The past is used symbolically to mean "the far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloos'd dreams" of Asia and Africa.

Section 3 is devoted to this "worship new", to the celebration of the achievements of the present through the depiction of "tableaus twain." But the poet insists that the ultimate service of these material achievements has a spiritual aim : "Lo soul for thee, of tableaus twain" : "yet thine, all thine O soul, the same."

Sections 4—6

The poet recalls certain visions of history which are linked by metaphor to space : events of time are "like clouds and cloudlets in the unreached sky." Time is equated with space not only in this comparison but also in another that immediately follows. The events of history are like "a rivulet running, sinking now, and now again to the surface rising".

Section 5 and 6 constitute the poet's spiritual view of the slopes of history. Section 5 is a poet's eye-view of history in contrast with the more orthodox historical view of Section 6.

Sections 7—9

After the triumph over space (Sections 1—3) and the mastery of time (Sections 4—6), the poet and his soul are ready to launch a voyage both spaceless and timeless. This voyage, "Back, back to wisdom's birth", may be interpreted in various ways. First, it may be a physical "return" to the east, the cradle of mankind, a return made possible by the material spanning of the earth. Secondly, it may be a return in spirit to the time of the earth of civilisation in the Orient. Thirdly, there may be a return to "reason's early paradise", "back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions. Finally, it may be a return to the time before birth, a time of pure, innocent, spiritual existence. The poet and his soul long for the mystic's experience in his union with God—a union in life identical with the union before and after life.

In Sections 8 and 9, the poet urges his soul to begin the voyage and he does so in a fervent mood, a mood of mystical ecstasy :

> O we can wait no longer,
> We two take ship O soul,
> Joyous we two launch out on trackless seas.

In Section 8 comes the climax of the poem, the culmination of the poet's imaginative union with God. Section 9 is a dramatisation of the poet's questioning, pleading with, and exhorting his soul. As the poem closes, the exclamations become more frequent, the lines shorter, until, in the last, the hypnotically repeated words suggest complete ecstatic, but spiritual, abandonment : "O farther, farther, farther sail !"

The same Whitman who conceived and wrote the caustic, devastating *Democratic Vistas* conceived and wrote the ultraoptimistic *Passage to India*. Out of bitter awareness of the weakness and hypocrisy of democracy, Whitman fashioned a poem which urged the reader not to lose his vision but to continue to look at the sky.

Passage to India has several merits ;

(1) It shows Whitman as the promoter of hard work by skilled hands without which the divine dreams of man remain unfulfilled.

(2) It is a chart of man's evolutionary growth over several periods : before 1492, 1492-1869, and so on. It also shows the motive power behind man's progress. This motive power is man's insatiable passion for the next higher stage.

(3) It predicts today's restless activity—in atomic energy, in space-probing and under-seas investigations, in plans for inter-planetary travel, etc.

(4) It shows how the dangers to the democratic faith can be assessed at their proper value, and how man and soul can rise above them.

The coming of the first Japanese Mission to the United States in 1858 occasioned Whitman's poem *A Broadway Pageant*. The completion of the Suez Canal and the Union Pacific Railroad in 1869 suggested his masterly *Passage to India*. The *Passage to India* is a survey of the globe, a statement of comparative religion, and an examination of world history. But it is not content to remain on earth and soars more and more into the illimitable. Here, for example, is such a section :

O we can wait no longer,
We too take shape O Soul,
Joyous we too launch out on trackless seas :
....
But with the mystery of God we dare not dally.

And a little latter :

Greater than stars or suns.
Bounding O Soul thou journeyest forth :
What love than thine and ours could wider amplify ?
....
The Younger melts in fondness in his arms.

Whitman in this passage addresses his own soul as an entity separate from, and yet identical with, Walt Whitman. But the soul has now soared above politics and history, and has become the transcendental and timeless and indestructible entity of a most mystical religion. It is significant that in this passage God does not figure as a father but as an elder brother who receives his younger brother, the human soul, after its passage through time into eternity.

58

Whispers of Heavenly Death

(First published in 1868)

I. TEXT

Whispers of heavenly death murmur'd I hear,
Labial gossip of night, sibilant chorals,
Footsteps gently ascending, mystical breezes wafted soft and low,
Ripples of unseen rivers, tides of a current flowing, forever flowing,
(Or is it the plashing of tears ? the measureless waters of human
tears ?)

I see, just see skyward, great cloud-masses,
Mournfully slowly they roll, silently swelling and mixing,
With at times a half-dimm'd sadden'd far off star,
Appearing and disappearing.

(Some parturition rather, some solemn immortal birth ;
On the frontiers to eyes impenetrable,
Some soul is passing over.)

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Whitman has been called a great poet of death because he deals with this subject in many poems such as *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd*, *O Captain ! My Captain*, *The Last Invocation*, and *Good-Bye ! My Fancy*. Death haunts Whitman's poetry in all its phases. In the poem before us the poet hears whispers of "heavenly death." He hears "footsteps gently ascending", and he becomes aware of "mystical breezes wafted soft and low".

Death in Whitman is no mere biological fact, but rather a sort of passage of the soul from this world to another world. That is why he speaks here of "some solemn immortal birth" and says :

> On the frontiers to eyes impenetrable,
> Some soul is passing over.

This poem, like many others by Whitman, shows clearly his faith in the existence of the soul and in the soul's immortality.

The poet here also shows his keen awareness of the tragic side of human life, when he speaks of the "plashing of tears, the measureless waters of human tears." In lines 6–9 he sees great cloud-masses rolling slowly and mournfully and "at times a half-dimm'd far-off star, appearing and disappearing." These lines have an obvious symbolic meaning.

Whispers of Heavenly Death is a metaphysical poem, with a solemn atmosphere. We see Whitman in a sombre mood here. But he poem is characterized by a quiet and dignified optimism.

59

The Last Invocation

(First published in 1868)

I. TEXT

At the last, tenderly,
From the walls of the powerful fortress'd house,
From the clasp of the knitted locks, from the keep of the well-closed
doors,
Let me be wafted.

Let me glide noiselessly forth ;
With the key of softness unlock the locks—with a whisper,
Set ope the doors O soul.

Tenderly—be not impatient,
(Strong is your hold O mortal flesh,
Strong is your hold O love.)

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The subject of this poem is the departure of the soul from the body. A time must come when the soul will quit the powerful, strong "house" in which it resides. The poet anticipates that time in his own case. He would like his soul to "glide noiselessly forth" from the body. He would like his soul to move out of the body "tenderly" and not impatiently because the hold of the flesh on the soul is very strong, and strong also is the hold of human love. The human body is tenacious of life, and human love is equally tenacious ; but the soul must depart from the body and bid good-bye to the love which bound it to this world. Thus the poet recognises the strong bonds of human ties and human love ; but death must snap those bonds.

The idea is expressed in metaphorical language. The human body is compared to a "powerful fortressed house", with its doors well-closed and properly locked. The locks must be unlocked and the doors of this house must be opened in order that the soul may "glide noiselessly forth".

The poet here contemplates death with calmness and courage, and yet there is a touch of pathos in these lines. The poem has a universal appeal because it deals with a universal theme. It leaves us brooding over the fate that is to overtake all of us. An atmosphere of melancholy envelops the poem. (It should be remembered that death is an ever-recurrent theme in the poetry of Whitman).

60

Gods

(First published in 1870)

I. TEXT

LOVER divine and perfect Comrade,
Waiting content, invisible yet, but certain,
Be thou my God

Thou, thou, the Ideal Man,
Fair, able, beautiful, content, and loving,
Complete in body and dilate in spirit,
Be thou my God.

O Death, (for Life has served its turn,)
Opener and usher to the heavenly mansion,
Be thou my God.

Aught, aught of mightiest, best I see, conceive, or know,
(To break the stagnant tie—thee, thee to free, O soul,)
Be thou my God.

All great ideas, the races' aspirations,
All heroisms, deeds of rapt enthusiasts,
Be ye my Gods.

Or Time and Space,
Or shape of Earth divine and wondrous,
Or some fair shape I viewing, worship,
Or lustrous orb of sun or star by night,

Be ye my Gods.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This is an absolutely unorthodox and unconventional poem. Whitman here gives us his conception of the divine. He does not speak of a personal God or of the gods of mythology. He gives us an idea of what seems to him to possess a God-like character. First of all, he speaks of a lover and perfect comrade whom he would look upon as his God. He speaks of the "Ideal Man, fair, able, beautiful, content, and loving, complete in body and dilate in spirit," and he would treat this Ideal Man as his God.

Next, Whitman looks upon Death as his God because, he points out, Life has served its turn and also because Death is the "opener and usher to the heavenly mansion." Then he goes on to say that he would treat as his God anything that is most powerful, anything that is the best he can see or know or imagine.

All great ideas, all the noble aspirations of various peoples, all heroisms, all great deeds of devotion and sincere enthusiasm are Whitman's Gods. Finally, his Gods are Time and Space, or the wonderful shape of Earth, or some bright planet (sun or star), or some fair shape which inspires him to worship.

God should, for the purpose of this poem, be understood to mean a great or lofty ideal or principle. Anything that is noble elevating, uplifting, inspiring, stirring, illuminating has, in Whitman's eyes, the nature of Divinity. If God be thus interpreted, nobody would quarrel with this poem. But most religious-minded people are believers in a personal God or in a Divine Spirit which pervades the universe and which controls the universe. To such readers this poem would seem to be anti-religious and even blasphemous.

61

On the Beach at Night

(First published in 1871)

I. TEXT

ON the beach at night,
Stands a child with her father,
Watching the east, the autumn sky.

Up through the darkness,
While ravening clouds, the burial clouds, in black masses spreading,
Lower sullen and fast athwart and down the sky,
Amid a transparent clear belt of ether yet left in the east,
Ascends large and calm the lord-star Jupiter,
And nigh at hand, only a very little above,
Swim the delicate sisters the Pleiades.

From the beach the child holding the hand of her father,
Those burial-clouds that lower victorious soon to devour all,
Watching, silently weeps.

Weep not, child,
Weep not, my darling,
With these kisses let me remove your tears,
The ravening clouds shall not long be victorious,
They shall not long possess the sky, they devour the stars only in apparition,
Jupiter shall emerge, be patient, watch again another night, the Pleiades shall emerge
They are immortal, all those stars both silvery and golden shall shine out again,
The great stars and the little ones shall shine out again, they endure,
The vast immortal suns and the long-enduring pensive moons shall again shine.

Then dearest child mournest thou only for Jupiter ?
Considerest thou alone the burial of the stars ?

Something there is,
(With my lips soothing thee, adding I whisper,
I give thee the first suggestion, the problem and indirection.)

Something there is more immortal even than the stars,
(Many the burials, many the days and nights, passing away,)
Something that shall endure longer even than lustrous Jupiter,
Longer than sun or any revolving satellite,
Or the radiant sisters the Pleiades.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

A little girl stands holding the hands of her father on the beach at night. The sky is covered with thick clouds and the child is weeping. The poet tries to console the child and to wipe off her tears with kisses. He assures the child that the clouds shall soon disappear and that the stars, the immortal stars, will emerge again. The lord-star Jupiter will presently be seen again ; so will the radiant Pleiades.

There is something "more immortal" even than the stars, says the poet, something that shall lost longer even than the bright Jupiter and the shining Pleiades. (The reference here is, of course, to soul and to God or the Divine Spirit).

The noteworthy features of this poem are (*a*) the distress of the child who is in tears ; (*b*) the consolation which the poet offers to the child and which is indicative of his optimism ; and (*c*) the poet's faith in the existence of the soul and the Divine Spirit. The poem has a tonic effect upon the reader because it reminds him that the burial clouds, which are a symbol of sorrow and suffering, shall not long be victorious and shall not long possess the sky.

The imagery of the poem is also noteworthy. There are "ravening clouds, the burial-clouds, in black masses spreading" and devouring the stars and making the little girl miserable. Then there is the optimistic picture with which the poet tries to comfort the child :

> They are immortal—all those stars, both silvery and
> golden, shall shine out again,
>
> The great stars and the little ones shall shine out again—
> they endure.

And lastly there is the picture of something which is "more immortal" even than stars :

> Something that shall endure longer even than lustrous
> Jupiter.

62

Adieu to a Soldier

(First published in 1871)

I. TEXT

ADIEU O soldier,
You of the rude campaigning, (which we shared.)
The rapid march, the life of the camp,
The hot contention of opposing fronts, the long manoeuvre,
Red battles with their slaughter, the stimulus, the strong terrific game,
Spell of all brave and manly hearts, the trains of time through you and like of you all fill'd,
With war and war's expression.

Adieu dear comrade,
Your mission is fulfill'd—but I, more warlike,
Myself and this contentious soul of mine,
Still on our own campaigning bound,
Through untried roads with ambushes opponents lined,
Through many a sharp defeat and many a crisis, often baffled,
Here marching, ever marching on, a war fight out—aye here,
To fiercer, weightier, battles give expression.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This short poem has two parts. In the first part (lines 1-7), the poet, imagining himself as a soldier who has fought in the war, bids farewell to a fellow-soldier because the war has now ended. The poet admirably sums up his experiences of the war in the following lines :

> The rapid march, the life of the camp,
> The hot contention of opposing fronts, the long manoeuvre,
> Red battles with their slaughter, the stimulus, the strong terrific game,
> Spell of all brave and manly hearts,...

In the second part (lines 8-15), the poet draws a distinction between himself and the fellow-soldier to whom he is bidding farewell. He points out that while his comrade's mission is fulfilled, he himself has to continue fighting, though now the fight is of a different kind. The poet has a "contentious soul" and has, therefore to, start another kind of campaign. This is a campaign in the course of which he has to travel along untried roads, face many crises and defeats, and to fight weightier battles :

> Through untried roads with ambushes opponents lined,
> Through many a sharp defeat and many a crisis, often
>   baffled,
> Here marching, ever marching on, a war fight out—aye
>   here,
> To fiercer, weightier battles give expression.

Thus the poet is "more war-like" than the dear comrade to whom he bids a farewell and whose mission is already completed. He is more war-like because his campaign is to continue even in times of peace. What he means is that even in times of peace he has to struggle and to strive against the odds of life and he has to seek and to explore the truths of life.

63

These Carols

(First published in 1871)

I. TEXT

THESE carols sung to cheer my passage through the world I see
For completion I dedicate to the Invisible World.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

These two lines are a mere trifle. The carols which the poet speaks about will cheer the poet's journey through life. He dedicates these carols to what he calls the "Invisible World", meaning the other world, the unknown world, the world which one enters after death. These two lines are, therefore, dedicatory in nature and they contain the poet's recognition of another world and, therefore, his faith in immortality.

64

Prayer of Columbus

(First published in 1874)

I. TEXT

A BATTER'D, wreck'd old man,
Thrown on this savage shore, far, far from home,
Pent by the sea and dark rebellious brows, twelve dreary months,
Sore, stiff with many toils, sicken'd and nigh to death,
I take my way along the island's edge,
Venting a heavy heart.

I am too full of woe !
Haply I may not live another day ;
I cannot rest O God, I cannot eat or drink or sleep,
Till I put forth myself, my prayer, once more to Thee,
Breathe, bathe myself once more in Thee, commune with Thee,
Report myself once more to Thee.

Thou knowest my years entire, my life,
My long and crowded life of active work, not adoration merely ;
Thou knowest the prayers and vigils of my youth,
Thou knowest my manhood's solemn and visionary meditations,
Thou knowest how before I commenced I devoted all to come to Thee,
Thou knowest I have in age ratified all those vows and strictly kept them,
Thou knowest I have not once lost nor faith nor ecstasy in Thee,
In shackles, prison'd in disgrace, repining not,
Accepting all from Thee, as duly come from Thee.

All my emprises have been fill'd with Thee,
My speculations, plans, begun and carried on in thoughts of Thee,
Sailing the deep or journeying the land for Thee ;
Intentions, purports, aspirations mine, leaving results to Thee.

O I am sure they really came from Thee,
The urge, the ardor, the unconquerable will,
The potent, felt, interior command, stronger than words,
A message from the Heavens whispering to me even in sleep,

These sped me on.
By me and these the work so far accomplish'd,
By me earth's elder cloy'd and stifled lands uncloy'd, unloos'd,
By me the hemispheres rounded and tied, the unknown to the known.

The end I know not, it is all in Thee,
Or small or great I know not—haply what broad fields what lands,
Haply the brutish measureless human undergrowth I know,
Transplanted there may rise to stature, knowledge worthy Thee,
Haply the swords I know may there indeed be turn'd to reaping-tools,
Haply the lifeless cross I know, Europe's dead cross, may bud and blossom there.
One effort more, my altar this bleak sand ;
That thou O God my life hast lighted,
With ray of light, steady, ineffable, vouchsafed of Thee,
Light rare untellable, lighting the very light,
Beyond all signs, descriptions, languages ;
For that O God, be it my latest word, here on my knees,
Old, poor, and paralyzed, I thank Thee.

My terminus near,
The clouds already closing in upon me,
The voyage balk'd, the course disputed, lost,
I yield my ships to Thee.

My hands, my limbs grow nerveless,
My brain feels rack'd, bewilder'd,
Let the old timbers part, I will not part,

I will cling fast to Thee, O God, though the waves buffet me,
Thee, Thee at least I know.

Is it the prophet's thought I speak, or am I raving ?
What do I know of life ? what of myself ?
I know not even my own work past or present,
Dim ever-shifting guesses of it spread before me,
Of newer better worlds, their mighty parturition,
Mocking, perplexing me.

And these things I see suddenly, what mean they ?
As if some miracle, some hand divine unseal'd my eyes,
Shadowy vast shapes smile through the air and sky,
And on the distant waves sail countless ships,
And anthems in new tongues I hear saluting me.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This poem is written in the form of a monologue, the speaker being Columbus. In order to understand the poem, we should know certain historical facts as stated by Whitman himself. On his last voyage when nearly 70 years of age, Columbus tried to save his two ashore on the Island of Jamaica where he had to spend a long and miserable years (1503). He was taken very sick, and had several relapses. His men revolted and death seemed imminent. Whitman in his poem describes the physical and mental condition of Columbus during that period.

As the title shows, the poem is a prayer addressed by Columbus to God. Columbus describes his misery and expresses his complete faith in the Supreme Power. He describes himself as a "wreck'd old man" thrown on a savage shore, far from home. He is sore, sick, and dying. He is full of woe and may not live another day. He cannot eat, or drink, or sleep. He would like to offer a prayer once more to God. He recalls his past life during which he reposed his full faith in God, a faith which remains unshaken even now. All his speculations, plans, aspirations in the past had their original in God. He brought the hemispheres together and linked the unknown to the known. What the end will be, only God knows. Perhaps "the brutish measureless human undergrowth may rise to knowledge" worthy of God ; and, perhaps, the swords will be changed to reaping tools.

Columbus offers his gratitude to God for the way God has lighted his life. This voyage of his has proved a failure, but he will cling fast to God. But what does he know of life and of himself : "I know not even my own work past or present." And what are the things that he sees suddenly ? He sees countless ships on the distant waves and he hears songs in praise of him being sung in new languages. Thus the "battered, wreck'd old man" experiences a vision of promise and makes a prophecy about the future.

This monologue reveals Columbus's mind and character, as conceived by Whitman. The poem shows Columbus's loyalty and devotion to his God and to his duty. The religious fervour of Columbus is, indeed, very impressive and striking. The last stanza is a prophetic vision showing the reward that is in store for Columbus and that he will get from the coming generations.

The poem has a tragic quality also. As Whitman himself stated : "See the figure of the great Admiral (Columbus), walking the beach, in this sublimest tragedy—for what tragedy, what poem, so piteous and majestic as the real scene ?" The poem is the soliloquy of a mystical and religious soul, a soliloquy that makes a powerful impact upon the reader. The poem is noteworthy also for its compact structure, while the language has many Biblical echoes, both in diction and in phrasing.

65

To a Locomotive in Winter

(First published in 1876)

I. TEXT

THEE for my recitative,
Thee in the driving storm even as now, the snow, the winter-day declining,
Thee in thy panoply, thy measur'd dual throbbing and thy beat convulsive.
Thy black cylindric body, golden brass and silvery steel,
Thy ponderous side-bars, parallel and connecting rods, gyrating, shuttling at thy sides,
Thy metrical, now swelling pant and roar, now tapering in the distance,
Thy great protruding head-light fix'd in front,
Thy long, pale, floating vapor-pennants, tinged with delicate purple,
The dense and murky clouds out-belching from thy smoke-stack,
Thy knitted frame, thy springs and valves, the tremulous twinkle of thy wheels,
Thy train of cars behind, obedient, merrily following,
Through gale or calm, now swift, now slack, yet steadily careering ;
Type of the modern—emblem of motion and power—pulse of the continent,
For once come serve the Muse and merge in verse, even as here I see thee,
With storm and buffeting gusts of wind and falling snow.
By day thy warning ringing bell to sound its notes,
By night thy silent signal lamps to swing.

Fierce throated beauty !
Roll through my chant with all thy lawless music, thy swinging lamps at night,
Thy madly-whistled laughter, echoing, rumbling like an earthquake rousing all,
Law of thyself complete, thine own track firmly holding,
(No sweetness debonair of tearful harp or glib piano thine,)
Thy trills of shrieks by rocks and hills return'd,
Launch'd o'er the prairies wide, across the lakes,
To the free skies unpent and glad and strong.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

As the title shows, this poem is addressed to a railway locomotive against a wintry background. The season of winter is suggested by a reference to the snow and the driving storm : "With storm and buffeting gusts of wind and falling snow." But the power and appeal of the poem consist in its vivid description of the locomotive. There is such a thrust in the phrases used to describe the locomotive that we feel overwhelmed by the poem. The locomotive is brought before our eyes by a remarkable piling of detail upon detail. The motion of the locomotive is indicated by such phrases as : "thy measur'd dual throbbing and thy beat convulsive." The various parts of the locomotive are described by means of powerful phrases which not only bring the shape of the locomotive before our eyes but which also convey to us the gigantic driving force of the engine. Indeed, this description of a railway engine is without parallel in English or American poetry :

> Thy black cylindric body, golden brass, and silvery steel,
> Thy ponderous side-bars, parallel and connecting rods,
> gyrating, shuttling at thy sides,
> Thy metrical, now swelling pant and roar, now tapering
> in the distance,.........

The "great protruding headlight" of the engine is not forgotten. Mention is also made of the thick and dark clouds of smoke emerging from the engine's chimney. The engine drives forward, now swift, now slack, through gale or calm. To the engine are hitched railway bogies which are "obedient" to the engine and which "merrily" follow it. The engine is rightly called the "emblem of motion and power."

The poet is fascinated by the engine and asks it to come and "merge" in his verse. In a most appropriate phrase, he addresses the engine as "Fierce-throated beauty" and asks it to roll through his poem with all its lawless music, with its "madly-whistled laughter, echoing, rumbling like an earthquake, rousing all". The shrieking sounds produced by the engine are not at all like the sweetness of the "tearful harp" or the "glib piano". The engine's shrieks are echoed by rocks and hills.

Indeed, it is a poem that we feel like reading again and again because of the graphic manner in which not only the shape and body of the engine is described but the powerful language by means of which the sounds produced by the engine are conveyed to us. It is a poem remarkable for its imagery.

66

The Dalliance of the Eagles

(First published in 1880)

I. TEXT

SKIRTING the river road, (my forenoon walk, my rest,)
Skyward in air a sudden muffled sound, the dalliance of the eagles,
The rushing amorous contact high in space together,
The clinching interlocking claws, a living, fierce, gyrating wheel,
Four beating wings, two beaks, a swirling mass tight grappling,
In tumbling turning clustering loops, straight downward falling,
Till o'er the river pois'd, the twain yet one, a moment's lull,
A motionless still balance in the air, then parting, talons loosing,
Upward again on slow-firm pinions slanting, their separate diverse
    flight,
She hers, he his, pursuing.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This short poem (of ten lines) contains a purely objective, and extremely vivid picture. It describes the mating of a pair of eagles up in the air, and is based on an observation that John Burroughs, the naturalist, had made and communicated to the poet.

It is the vividness of the imagery and the choice of words that are the striking features of this poem. The mating of the pair of eagles is thus described :

> The rushing amorous contact high in space together,
> The clinching inter-locking claws, a living, fierce gyrating
>   wheel...

We have here a picture of violent movement reaching the peak of agitation in the phrase : "a living, fierce, gyrating wheel." The mating of the eagles does not mean the loss of individuality by either of them. The two eagles separate, with their individualities unimpaired. They make their "separate diverse flight."

Although no symbolism is to be read into this poem, we could perhaps maintain that the mating and the separating of the two eagles suggest the possibility of a reconciliation between man's "contrary impulses toward selfhood and toward submergence of self in relationship with others." However, as has already been indicated above, the chief value of this poem lies in the brilliance of a single image presented by the author, the only human interest being the author's reference to his forenoon walk in the opening line.

67

Animals

(First published in 1855)

I. TEXT

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-
contain'd,
I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied—not one is demented with the mania of owning
things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of
years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.
So they show their relations to me and I accept them,
They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their
possession.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This brief extract is taken from Whitman's *Song of Myself*. It is the first half of passage number 32 in that long poem. These are some of the most famous lines in the entire poetry of Whitman. They are famous because they have a universal appeal. The poet contrasts the life of human beings with that of animals. The animals are happy and contented, while human beings are dissatisfied and miserable. Animals do not grumble about their condition. They have no grievances. Human beings feel restless and are unable to sleep at night because they are haunted by their misdeeds. Animals enjoy their sleep and have no sense of guilt. Human beings are troubled by the thought of their duty of God. Animals do not have any such feeling. Human beings are crazy with a desire to possess things and are, therefore, always unhappy. That is not so in the case of animals. Human beings have to flatter those from whom they seek favours, but animals do not have to resort to such devices. In view of all this, the poet could live in the company of animals and thus feel happier. It is because of the serenity and peace of animals that he stands and looks at them "long and long".

While these lines certainly make us envy animals and their freedom from all cares and anxieties, we should not forget that this is only one side of the picture. Man's whole superiority over animals consists in the fact that man has a mind which can think and argue, while animals live by instinct alone. The whole civilization of man is the result of man's thinking faculty. Man's discontentment with life is itself a result of his thinking mind. In spite of all our sweating and whining, in spite of our sins and our repentance, in spite of our having to kneel to others, we would certainly not exchange our life with that of animals. In a certain mood we are bound to feel attracted by this poem, but we cannot treat the idea of these lines as a serious proposition. In this respect these lines remind us of the mood of Tennyson's poem *The Lotos-Eaters*, in which also the poet seeks to escape from the burdens and anxieties of life.

There is a touch of impiety in the line where the poet refers to his feeling sick of people's discussions about their duty to God. One reason why the poet envies the animals is that "they do not make me sick discussing their duty to God."

68

A Hub for the Universe

(First published in 1855)

I. TEXT

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is,
And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own
funeral drest in his shroud,
And I or you pocketless of a dime may purchase the pick of the
earth,
And to glance with an eye or show a bean in its pod confounds the
learning of all times,
And there is no trade or employment but the young man following it
may become a hero,
And there is no object so soft but it makes a hub for the wheel'd
universe.
And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and
composed before a million universes.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

These lines are another extract from *Song of Myself*. They constitute the first half of passage number 48 in that long poem. A number of ideas find expression here. In the first place, the poet expresses his favourite belief that the body and the soul are equally important. He, thus differs, fundamentally from those philosophers and men of religion who consider the soul to be superior to the body and who relegate the body to an unimportant position. Whitman does not believe in mortifying the flesh or subjecting the body to the rigours of penance or asceticism. In fact, he exalts the body to a high position, and establishes a parity between the body and the soul. Then he goes on to say that nothing, not even God, is greater to one than one's ownself is. By saying so he glorifies the self or the ego. There may be a touch of impiety in his saying that even God is not greater to one than one's ownself is, but Whitman here exalts the individual self to a high status. Next, he speaks of the essential need of human sympathy. Life without sympathy is impossible. He then goes on to invest trivial things with a rare importance: "And to glance with an eye, or show a bean in its pod confounds the learning of all times." One can become a hero even in the ordinary spheres of life. There is no trade or employment by pursuing which it is not possible for a young man to distinguish himself and to attain renown :

"And there is no trade or employment but the young man following it may become a hero." Even the flimsiest object in this universe is important and essential, so important that it "makes a hub for the wheeled universe".

In the rest of the passage (not quoted here), Whitman asks human beings not to be curious about God. They can hear and see God in every object even though they may not understand Him. God can be seen each moment in the faces of men and women and in every object.

Thus these lines contain some of the most characteristic ideas of Whitman. The body and the soul are equally important. One's self is greater than even God. (This is the height of egoism). Human sympathy is essential. Every little thing is a miracle. Every trade or employment offers unlimited scope for the exercise of one's talents. Even the softest object occupies a key place in the universe.

69

Good-Bye My Fancy

(First published in 1891)

I. TEXT

Good-Bye my Fancy !
Farewell dear mate, dear love !
I'm going away, I know not where,
Or to what fortune, or whether I may ever see you again,
So Good-bye my Fancy.

Now for my last—let me look back a moment ;
The slower fainter ticking of the clock is in me,
Exit, nightfall, and soon the heart-thud stopping.

Long have we lived, joy'd, caress'd together ;
Delightful !—now separation—Good-bye my Fancy.

Yet let me not be too hasty,
Long indeed have we lived, slept, filter'd, become really blended into one ;
Then if we die we die together, (yes, we'll remain one,)
If we go anywhere we'll go together to meet what happens,
May-be we'll be better off and blither, and learn something,
May-be it is yourself now really ushering me to the true songs, (who knows ?)
May-be it is you the mortal knob really undoing, turning—so now finally,
Good-bye—and hail ! my Fancy.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Here is another poem dealing with the subject of death. The poet personifies his "fancy" and treats it as his mate or companion. In other words, he gives to his fancy a separate identity. Anticipating his departure from this world, he bids good-bye to his fancy. Death will take him he does not know where. The poet fully recognises the mystery of death. He does not know where he will go after death and what is in store for him : "I'm going away, I do not know where,/Or to what fortune." There is a possibility that he may be better off and happier after death, and he may learn something. It is possible that in his next life he may hear and sing "true songs." Thus the poet affirms, as in many other poems, his faith in the immortality of the soul.

The poet recalls how he and his fancy have lived together and how their companionship has been a source of joy to him. Now death will separate them. But then it occurs to him that he and his fancy must die together and that, therefore, death is not only an occasion for him to bid good-bye to his fancy, but also to greet his fancy. He and his fancy are not really going to be separated. On the contrary, they will die in this world together and rise together in another world. And therefore : "Good-bye—and hail ! my Fancy".

This poem, like *The Last Invocation*, is written in a contemplative mood. Here also the poet faces the prospect of death with calmness, courage and confidence. The feeling of uncertainty is there no doubt, as it is bound to be in all speculations about death ; but there is also the certainty of another life after death.

In spite of the feeling of confidence with which the poet contemplates death, the touch of pathos in the poem is unmistakable. This is how the poet describes the approach of death :

> The slower fainter ticking of the clock is in me,
> Exit, nightfall, and soon the heart-thud stopping.

(The personification of fancy here is just a poetic device. Actually no separation is possible between a human being and any of his faculties. The poet here separates his mind or consciousness from what he calls his fancy, although the two are in fact identical. By personifying fancy and separating it from his mind, the poet merely seeks an opportunity to express some of his thoughts about life and death).

Important Questions

1. Walt Whitman claimed that he was the poet of the body and the poet of the soul. Discuss this claim, giving illustrations.

2. In what sense was Walt Whitman a rebel ? Illustrate your answer with reference to poems prescribed for your study.

3. Write a critical note on Whitman as the bard of American democracy.

4. "The miracle of the human personality rustles through *Leaves of Grass* like a breeze". Discuss.

5. Whitman said about his *Leaves of Grass* "Camerado, this is no book, Who touches this, touches a man." Elucidate.

6. "Walt Whitman was a poet orientated toward the future, toward tomorrow." How far is this judgment true ?

7. Write a note on Whitman as the poet of death and immortality.

8. Do you regard Whitman as a great poet ? Give reasons for your answer.

9. "The Modern Man I Sing", wrote Whitman. Is that true of his poetry ?

10. Write an essay on Whitman as a poet, clearly bringing out his excellences and his faults.

11. What have you to say about what Whitman called his "barbaric yawp" ?

12. It is said the Whitman's best poems show a satisfying structure. How far it is true of the following poems : *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* ; *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd* ; *Passage to India.*

13. Trace the elements of mysticism in the poetry of Walt Whitman. What is new or original in his mysticism ?

14. To what extent is Whitman an egotist in his poetry ? How does his egotism affect the quality of his work ?

15. Whitman may be a mystic, but he is also a materialist. Discuss.

16. Write a note on Whitman as a love-poet. *OR*, Discuss Whitman's treatment of love and sex in his poetry.

17. Consider Whitman's contribution to English poetry.

18. What image of America does Whitman project through his poetry ? Is it correct to regard him as his nation's spokesman and prophet ?

19. What is the "myth of America" that Whitman creates in verse ?

20. Write an essay on Whitman's optimism.

21. In what way is Whitman a poetic innovator ?

22. Write a note on the technical aspects of Whitman's poetry. (*Or*, Discuss Whitman's poetic style and technique).

23. State clearly Whitman's theory of poetry as stated in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*. How far does his work illustrate his theory ?

24. Write a note on Whitman's symbolic treatment of his themes.

25. What are the main themes in Whitman's poetry ? Illustrate your answer.

26. Write a critical appreciation of any two of the following poems : *Song of the Open Road* ; *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* ; *Passage to India* ; *Prayer of Columbus* ; *The Wound-Dresser* ; *The Sleepers* ; *Chanting the Square Deific*.

27. Discuss critically either of the two major elegiac poems written by Whitman.

28. Which poems of Whitman would you regard as "imagist" ?

29. What qualities of Whitman's poetry are revealed through the Sections of *Song of Myself* prescribed for your study ?

30. How does Whitman portray Abraham Lincoln in *O Captain, My Captain* and *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd* ?

31. Examine the ideas expressed by Whitman in his poem *To Think of Time*. Are these ideas acceptable to you ?

32. Comment on the poet's attitude to death as stated in *The Last Invocation* ; *Good-Bye My Fancy*, and *Whispers of Heavenly Death.*

33. How far do you agree with the views expressed in *Animals* and *A Hub for the Universe.*

34. Discuss the group of poems in "Children of Adam" with special reference to (*i*) *I Sing the Body Electric* (*ii*) *A Woman Waits for Me* (*iii*) *Native Moments*, and (*iv*) *Once I Pass'd through a Populous City.*

35. Write a critical note on the "Calamus" poems with special reference to (*i*) *Whoever you are Holding me now in Hand* (*ii*) *I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing* (*iii*) *To a Stranger* (*iv*) *I Hear it was Charged against Me*, and (*v*) *A Glimpse.*

36. Write a critical appreciation of *Pioneers ! O Pioneers.*

37. What light do the following poems throw on Whitman as poet : *Tears* ; *A Hand-Mirror* ; *Gods* ; *When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer* ; *Aboard at a Ship's Helm* ; *To a Locomotive in Winter.*

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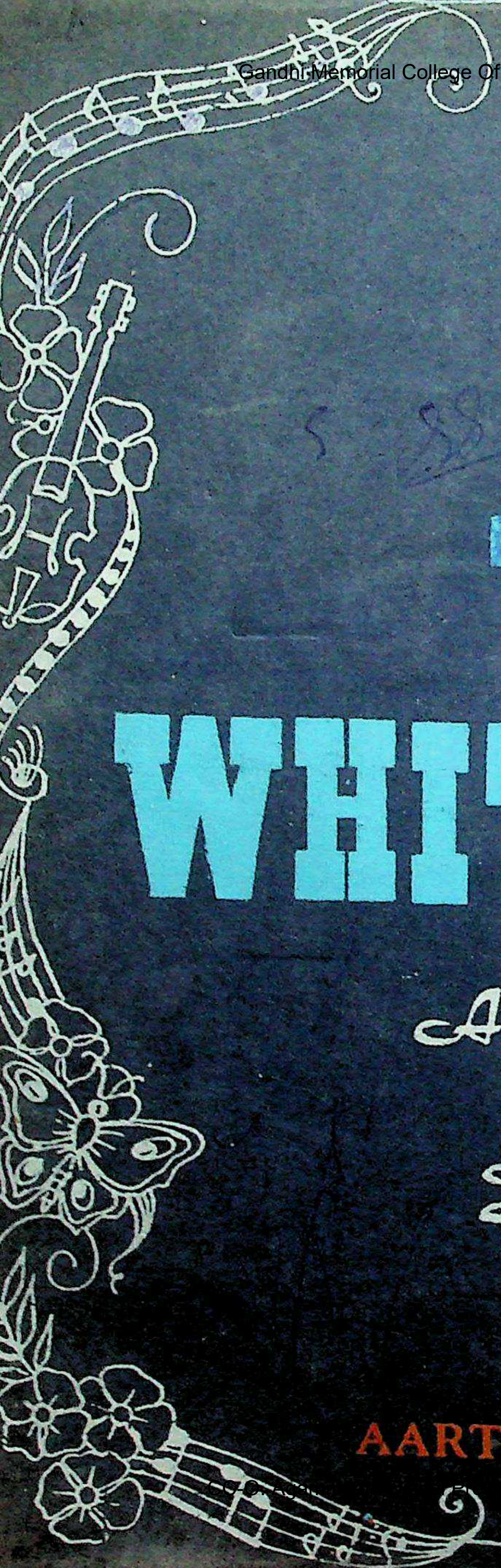

RAMJI LALL

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WALT WHITMAN

An Evaluation of His Poetry

AARTI BOOK CENTRE
NEW DELHI-8